

2018

Factors Influencing Persistence of Students with Learning Disabilities at Four-Year Institutions

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Eastern Illinois University

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Factors Influencing Persistence of Students with Learning

Disabilities at Four-Year Institutions

(TITLE)

BY

Abigail Frye

THESIS

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Abstract

This study investigated the persistence and transition of college students with learning disabilities at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The qualitative, narrative approach was used to determine which factors influenced the persistence of students with learning disabilities at a four-year, mid-sized university and which college services and resources students with learning disabilities utilized. This research found that students do utilize college services and supports to assist through their transitions into college. The participants in this research relied on the support of their family and friends while they approached and navigated their college transition. This study found that students with learning disabilities could benefit from additional support from campus disability support offices, student affairs professionals, K-12 educators, and parents and families of the students. Results from this research cannot be generalized for all students with learning disabilities as the participants were in varying stages of growth and development.

Key words: Students with Disabilities, Learning disabilities, Persistence, Advocacy, College Transition, Office of Disability Services

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to college students with learning disabilities who work every day to accomplish their goals. I hope that students feel encouraged to advocate for their needs and I hope that research continues to highlight how this population can be supported as they navigate higher education.

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Factors Influencing Persistence of Students with Learning Disabilities at a Four-Year

Institution

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Students with learning disabilities continue to enroll at institutions of higher education at an increasing rate (Hadley, 2017; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). While a large portion of institutions enrolled students with disabilities in the 2008-2009 school year, 86% of these total enrolled students with disabilities reported having specific learning disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Laws have been enacted that required more services and support to be provided to students with disabilities in educational settings (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). A majority of this responsibility falls on institutions to provide support and services to these students.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504, along with the 14th Amendment are the main federal laws that protect students with disabilities from discrimination while attending college (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was passed in 2004. This law emphasized the importance for secondary educators to provide support and motivation to students with disabilities to attend college (Madaus, Grigal, & Hughes, 2014; Plotner & Marshall, 2014). Through recent amendments to this act, changes have been made to ensure this transition planning happens at an age no older than sixteen (Prince, Plotner, & Yell, 2014). Because of these laws, students with disabilities continue to pursue postsecondary education. Research shows they persist at lower rates than students without disabilities (Hamblet, 2014; Lee, Rojewski, Gregg, & Jeong, 2015).

These federal laws are a major factor in the recent push to provide transition support to students with disabilities (Weis, Dean, & Osborne, 2016). Specifically,

research considers quality and usage of the university-provided supports in relation to the students' inability to persist. Some research has even examined the importance of creating clear and consistent guidelines for documenting a disability and how practitioners should make sense of the new laws (Banerjee, Madaus, & Gelbar, 2015). However, most older research fails to examine the perspectives and voices of students with learning disabilities (Denhart, 2008). This research will concentrate on the perspectives and experiences of students diagnosed with learning disabilities and the factors that contribute to their retention. In this research, learning disabilities are defined as a variety of conditions that may influence students' learning performance (Hadley, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that influence the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities at a four-year, mid-sized university. Another purpose is to determine if university services and resources within the institution influence persistence of college students with learning disabilities. I am motivated to learn more about the factors that influence persistence of college students with learning disabilities because I have experience working with students, co-workers, and friends who have a disability. In high school, I volunteered in the classroom for students with cognitive/intellectual disabilities my senior year; this is where I found a passion for supporting students who were looking for additional support from those around them. Since then, I have volunteered and worked with individuals with disabilities and have found a passion in helping these students receive the support they need to successfully achieve their goals. I want to take this understanding and perspective and use

it to gain a better understanding of students' transitions into college and how their support systems, both formal and informal, influenced their transition.

Research Questions

To gain insight into the experiences and persistence factors of participants, the following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do students with learning disabilities at a four-year college persist?
2. What college services and resources contribute to the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities?

Significance of the Study

Four-year universities are constantly working to improve their retention efforts because student retention is a principal focus within postsecondary education (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). In response to the emphasis on retention efforts, this study will investigate which on-campus services and resources affect the persistence of students with learning disabilities. The results of this investigation will highlight university resources that influence the persistence of students with learning disabilities. This study will also show which resources or services the university could improve upon regarding their retention efforts. In the literature, students cite faculty perceptions, fit of advisors, stressors, and quality of support services as obstacles to their education and success (Hong, 2015). Though many policymakers work to create and enact new laws in order to add more support for students with disabilities, there are not many ways for those diagnosed with a learning disability to contribute to this conversation (Denhart, 2008). If universities want to continue to retain successful students with learning disabilities, they need to understand from the students' perspectives which factors contribute to their

success (Kilpatrick et al., 2016). With this study, I hope to add to the research conversation by providing a qualitative consideration of the perspectives of students with Learning disabilities attending a four-year mid-sized rural university.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study. First, the interviews from a smaller group of students cannot be generalized onto the entire population of students with a learning disability attending a university. This research does not contain an in-depth definition of learning disabilities because this research isn't focused on the disability itself. Instead, this research focuses on the individuals and, in doing so, each will have different needs. Though the research is set up to discover patterns and connections, it cannot be seen to represent every student at a college diagnosed with a learning disability. This means that the transferability is not as strong in a qualitative study like this one as it would be in a quantitative study. The results also cannot be generalized to all students attending a university. However, the findings will still be relevant and will hold a level of applicability toward the profession even without a large amount of transferability. Furthermore, since qualitative research relies on individuals' perceptions and explanations, consistency between interviews may not always be possible. A participant's experience within qualitative research is still considered highly important, and therefore, outweighs the idea that participants cannot represent every student with learning disabilities attending college (Krefting, 1991).

Definition of Terms

Accommodations. Any change in the work or school environment or in the way things are customarily done that enables an individual with a disability to enjoy equal opportunities (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”).

Campus Resources. Supports and services offered by the university to assist students.

Disability. A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”).

Individualized education plan (IEP). A required piece of documentation for individuals in the K-12 educational system, which includes a student’s individualized needs and requirements for success. IEPs will be discussed in further detail within the literature review.

Learning disability. A comprehensive term for a variety of diagnosed conditions that may influence students’ learning performance (Hadley, 2017). Some of these conditions consist of processing disorders, inability to organize thoughts and ideas, involve motor skills, or involve storing or retrieving short-term memories.

Persistence. A student’s continual journey in a degree program leading toward the completion of the program and therefore being awarded a college degree in the student’s field of study (King, 2005).

Retention. Continuation with studies from the previous year (Kilpatrick et al., 2017).

Students with learning disabilities. Students who have a diagnosis of a learning disability determined by the American Higher Education and Disability association guidelines (Denhart, 2008).

Summary

Changes in federal laws concerning students with disabilities have motivated more students with disabilities to pursue postsecondary education. Overall, this study will consider what factors influence the persistence of college students with learning disabilities at a four-year, mid-sized, rural, Midwestern university. Research will distinguish between internal and external factors with a specific consideration given to institutional resources or supports. The significance of this study is to provide a reflection of the experiences and perspectives of students diagnosed with a learning disability at a four-year university. The goal is to utilize results to provide feedback or a plan to the offices on campus that support students diagnosed with a learning disability. Though more students with disabilities are attending postsecondary institutions, there is always an opportunity to increase that number by ensuring our transition services promote persistence (Joshi, & Bouck, 2017).

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

This literature review will explore previous research on college student persistence factors and those of students with disabilities. In order to understand what influences students' persistence, we need to understand what the various factors may be, what sense of belonging may look like for college students as well as what it looks like for students with learning disabilities. The literature review will explore which external factors may influence persistence of college students with learning disabilities while also exploring the campus resources that may contribute to student persistence as well. The background on learning disabilities, disability theory, institutional resources, persistence factors, sense of belonging, social student experience, and academic student experience are all discussed in detail within the following literature review.

Learning Disabilities

The history of civil rights in the United States and Disability Rights activism led to laws to protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities. These laws provide high schools and colleges the required support responsibilities for students with disabilities. This section explores the history and laws impacting college students with disabilities while also comparing high school and college responsibilities to serve students with disabilities.

History. The evolution of services and programs for college students with disabilities is largely influenced by periods of advocacy and change throughout the course of history. In 1864 Gallaudet College opened as the first place of postsecondary education for students with hearing impairments. This was the first college or university

that emphasized working with students with disabilities (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017; Madaus, 2011). In the early to mid-twentieth century, many veterans enrolled in higher education because of the GI bill and this led to an increase in students with disabilities enrolling in college. According to Madaus (2011), self-advocacy by students with disabilities and allies led to the formation of programs for students with different disabilities on a few campuses. Advocacy continued to play a large role in disability rights during the civil rights movement. This period of history created a momentum for expanding programs and services for students with disabilities in higher education (Madaus, 2011). Overall, this shift in the discussion and approach to students with disabilities led to specific legislation that centered around students with disabilities in higher education.

Laws. There are four foundational laws that specifically affect college students with disabilities. Evans and colleagues (2017) recently wrote a text book entitled *Disability in Higher Education*, which explores these foundational disability laws. This text includes detailed explanations about the laws and the effects of these laws on college students with disabilities between 1973 and 2017. Much of this discussion on disability laws in the United States utilizes this text as a reference as it is one of the most recent explorations of the laws and their influences on college students with disabilities.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was signed into law in 1973 (Evans et al., 2017). This was the first piece of legislation that provided individuals with disabilities equal access to higher education along with providing a foundational language for disability issues. If institutions failed to meet the standards described within Section 504, the university risked losing its federal funding (Evans et al., 2017). Section 504 was an

important piece of the Rehabilitation Act because it forced institutions to provide equal access or risk losing their federal funding (Banerjee, Madaus, & Gelbar, 2015; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Evans, et al., 2017; Simon, 2011). However, there were a few problems with Section 504. The only power this law held over universities was their federal funding. The language and definitions used in the law were also vague and called for individual interpretation. This led to many court cases where the courts determined their own definitions (Evans et al., 2017). Despite these challenges, Section 504 led to an increased enrollment of students with disabilities (Madaus, Grigal, & Hughes, 2014; Plotner & Marshall, 2014).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was initially passed in 1990 and was reauthorized in 2009 (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). ADA was another foundational piece of legislation for college students with disabilities because it broadened and extended the protections offered to these students within Section 504 (Evans et al., 2017). This law was important because it tried to be more specific while defining different aspects of disability laws. Per ADA, accommodation is defined as “any change in the work or school environment or in the way things are customarily done that enables an individual with a disability to enjoy equal opportunities” (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). This law also differentiated between accommodations and personal services which impacted higher education because some supports that are considered accommodations in high school are personal services within the context of a college or university (Evans et al., 2017). Title I of ADA focuses on employment and provides protections to employees and applicants and requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations throughout the hiring and

employment process (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). Title II is specifically for protections through the State and Local Governments; it applies to every program, department that directly runs through the government, or uses state or federal funds (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). This title specifically defines reasonable accommodations or changes to policies, practices and procedures in relation to avoiding discrimination (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). This title is the title that directly affects college students with disabilities as all colleges receive federal funding. Title III (Public Accommodations) sets the minimum standards for accommodations and accessibility within private places (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). Title IV (Telecommunications) is written specifically for people with hearing and speech disabilities to still be able to communicate over the telephone (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”). Title V (Miscellaneous Provisions) is the last title within ADA. It contains other provisions and areas where discrimination is defined and prohibited (“Americans with disabilities act of 1990, as amended, 2009”).

The Higher Education Opportunity Act passed in 2008 was another important addition to the previous disability laws for college students with disabilities. This law was not solely focused on students with disabilities like Section 504 and ADA were (Evans et al., 2017). The Higher Education Opportunity Act included stipulations about student loans and federal aid along with improving college access to many different student populations. This law involved a two-pronged approach to improve access to students with disabilities (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). The first prong involved the formation and disbursement of grants to higher education institutions to encourage stronger institutional

supports for students with disabilities. The second piece of this initiative was the creation of Advisory Commission on Accessible Instructional Materials in Postsecondary Education for students with disabilities that focused on assisting students with print disabilities (Kaplin & Lee, 2013).

The fourth foundational postsecondary disability law is the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) passed in 2009. This act further clarified who is considered to have a disability under the law (Evans et al., 2017). ADAAA also made it easier for students to request accommodations and provide proof of their disabilities by reducing the required documentation or materials necessary to receive support on a college campus (Evans et al., 2017). Since this is the newest law, scholars are still watching to determine the implications of ADAAA (Heyward, 2011; Simon, 2011). According to Kaplin and Lee (2013), four implications of ADAAA are starting to become clear:

1) the way courts were previously able to narrow the definition of a disability can't happen anymore, 2) twice exceptional students may receive extended coverage and benefit from ADAAA, 3) the broader definitions will implicate further case law surrounding the subject, 4) courts will be less willing to award summary judgement to colleges. (p. 1096)

For many college students with learning disabilities, these laws have many daily implications to their educational success. According to Evans and colleagues (2017), students must first establish through the laws that they are qualified to receive the benefits of the public service, program, or activity. They must also prove they are "otherwise qualified," which means they can meet the academic requirements of the

program (Evans et al., 2017). Students must also properly inform the institution of their disability through the correct university policies and procedures and show that it will affect a major life activity in a significant way (Evans et al., 2017). After this is completed, the disability service provider will begin the accommodation process (Evans et al., 2017).

College Responsibility. The addition of new disability laws throughout history has affected the institutional responsibility in relation to disability services on the college campus. One responsibility colleges have is to work in conjunction with secondary education faculty and support staff to ease students' transitions to a university. Eckes and Ochoa (2005) wrote a position paper about the changes in federal laws relating to special education. The authors recommended that students with disabilities understand all the laws that are out there specifically for special education students. The paper concluded by emphasizing the importance of strong communication and a team effort between secondary and postsecondary institutions, particularly in relation to easing the transition from high school to college for students with disabilities. The authors discussed that many higher education instructors did not have to take any form of special education training before becoming a professor (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). This is a distinct difference for students as in high school many teachers have some training/coursework dedicated to teaching students with disabilities. At the very least, students have access to special education teachers in high school. In college this is not the case; professors are not usually required to complete training on how to accommodate and educate students with disabilities (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

Compliance with the recent laws and changes was cited as another college responsibility (Heyward, 2011; Simon, 2011). Heyward (2011) wrote a chapter outlining the changes to disability law after the ADAAA was passed in 2009. Heyward examined the newly expanded definition provided in the ADAAA and how most of compliance responsibility fell on the schools themselves, and not on the students. Likewise, Simon (2011) also wrote a chapter researching the effects Section 504, ADA, and ADAAA will have on universities and their responsibility to college students with disabilities. Though students are expected to hold some accountability, Simon focused on the new emphasis of universities to ensure someone receives their required accommodations without having to submit an extremely extensive amount of information. This is still contingent upon the student disclosing their disability and the student wanting to utilize their accommodation.

Simon (2011) also highlighted the importance of consistent, common-sense practices while assigning accommodations. Because the learning disability accommodation decision-making process is directly affected by these recent laws, Banerjee, Madaus, and Gelbar (2015) studied the application of learning disability documentation guidelines at the post-secondary level using 900 directors and coordinators of disability service programs as participants. Banerjee and colleagues found there was a need for consistent criteria for documenting a disability. Their study provided insight that the directors and coordinators felt there was inconsistency and that creating criteria paired with increased professional development relating to accommodation decision-making would benefit their offices and the students (Banerjee, Madaus, & Gelbar, 2015). Though the research does focus on the narrower definition and stipulations

provided by the ADAAA, the results highlighted a need for more consistent disability service provider training on accommodation decision-making (Banerjee et al., 2015).

High School Responsibility. When it comes to students with learning disabilities and transition planning, high schools have a different set of responsibilities because they are guided by different laws (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Evans et al., 2017) K-12 education in the United States provides protection to students with disabilities through IDEA, however, once students continue to college, they are then covered by ADA, ADAAA and Section 504 (Evans et al., 2017). According to Evans and Colleagues (2017) this transition impacts students in three major ways: 1) Under IDEA, students are usually just bystanders while parents and teachers take the lead role in advocacy for services provided to the student, 2) parents have less say in the process post-high school, and 3) students experience different and sometimes less support relating to accommodation services and eligibility once they get to college. This is important because the requirements in high school are about structure and active support from others, not about educating students about self-advocacy (Evans et al., 2017). Because parents have less say in their child's day-to-day decisions in college, this could negatively impact the students who are used to their parents making their decisions for them. Janiga and Costenbader (2002) researched the high school to college transition for college students with learning disabilities. They surveyed 74 participants and results showed that many students were not satisfied with the transition services provided by the colleges (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Janiga and Costenbader concluded by stating high schools should focus on the improvement of their assessment process and include documentation for specific accommodations that students could use as they transition into postsecondary education. Cawthon and Cole (2010)

researched the perspectives of students with learning disabilities on the barriers they faced in their transition into college by surveying 110 participants from a large, public, research university. They found students didn't have as much variance in accommodation requesting experience between high school and college as researchers had expected. Many participants did not receive, or only received minimal transitional planning as they were transitioning out of high school even though IDEA requires it. Overall, Cawthon and Cole did find that students had positive experiences within their transition when it came to some accommodations, but still struggled with their self-advocacy and knowledge of their own needs.

Disability Theory Frameworks

There are multiple theories that focus on students with disabilities and their identity development. It is important to understand these theories and how they relate to this study for a few reasons. First, understanding of the following theories will guide the research and approach to the methodology. The literature surrounding college students with learning disabilities utilizes theories to frame the research and results. This relies on exploring the factors that influence college persistence of students with learning disabilities. This also relies on using the following theories to frame the research because the theories focus on individuals with a disability and their ability to transition and cope with their identity.

Johnstone's (2004) disability identity model. Johnstone (2004) created an identity model that explores six categories of disability identity based on a review of literature that he conducted specific to disability and identity. This model is developmental and is specifically an ecological model, which means it explores how the

environment influences the individual's identity development (Evans et al., 2017). The first category, externally ascribed disempowering identities, describes identities that are heavily influenced by stigmatization and external sources which limits the opportunity for self-exploration and discovery of identity (Johnstone, 2004). A student in this category may have little knowledge of their disability and be unwilling to learn about it or do anything about it. Overcompensating identities is Johnstone's second category which describes students who have disclosed their disability to other people but feel they must prove themselves by out-performing their peers or their own challenges. One might see a college student in this category exhibiting behaviors of full disclosure to their peers, faculty, and staff. They may also spend many more hours studying for class than their peers in order to get a more desirable grade and then vocalize their success to peers and others.

The third category, identities that shift the focus away from disability, describes individuals who try to push past their disability to perform tasks in the socially acceptable way so as not to show they are different (Johnstone, 2004). In this category, a student may choose to avoid obtaining accommodations, and not seek extra assistance from their professors. Students in this category would not seek help because if they did, they would show their vulnerability and difference to their peers. Empowering identities in Johnstone's fourth category and this identity is like the immersion stage of the other minority identity theories because students in this stage take pride in their difference and reclaim their own narrative. A student in this category would be unashamed about receiving accommodations and would use the supports provided by the university if they needed them for their success. Complex identities is the fifth stage and this category is

when individuals see their disability as a portion of their identity along with their other characteristics (Johnstone, 2004). A student would acknowledge their disability in this category, but they would not let their disability be the entire story of their identity. A student in this category would probably feel more comfortable joining other extra-curricular activities to develop other pieces of their identity. Johnstone's final identity type is the common identity which describes the shared feelings and exploration of the disability culture with other individuals with a disability. A student within this category may seek out a support group for students with disabilities or find other avenues to support other students with disabilities.

Gibson's (2006) disability identity model. Gibson (2006) proposed a three-stage disability identity model that shares similar ideas with Johnstone's (2004) model. The first stage in this theory is the passive awareness stage, where students are lacking access to a role model, and avoid acknowledging their disability (Gibson, 2006). At this stage, students usually avoid interaction and association with other individuals with disabilities (Gibson, 2006). This would be the stage where many students choose to avoid requesting accommodations or do not disclose to their professors or the university. Realization is the second stage of Gibson's theory, and this stage usually takes place during early adolescence or into young adulthood. This middle-stage is when individuals are most likely to experience anger and self-hatred or self-consciousness about their disability (Gibson, 2006). This stage can be applied to the students who feel self-conscious while working on group projects with other students. The final stage, acceptance, is when students change their perspective about their disability, understanding their disability in a positive way and utilizing strategies to integrate into society while having a disability

(Gibson, 2006). According to Gibson, this final stage is when some individuals begin to surround themselves with other people with disabilities and may even become involved with advocacy. A student in this stage of Gibson's theory would find themselves comfortable requesting the support they need while also opening up to others about their identity and experiences.

Critical Disability Theory. Critical Disability Theory is largely composed of four components. Critical disability theorists define disability a bit differently; they provide a definition that allows the idea of disability to change over time and be intersectional as well (Evans et al., 2017). According to Evans and colleagues (2017), this theory also uses local knowledge which is crucial for anyone working in student affairs with students with disabilities. Third, this theory focuses largely on social justice. The fourth component of Critical Disability Theory is that it explores the relationship between impairment and environment (Evans et al., 2017). While researching this topic, it's important to consider Critical Disability Theory especially while exploring how a student's environment may influence their perception of their own disability and their overall transition experience.

Institutional Resources

Institutional resources like disability support offices and the services they provide are one of the main supports advertised to students with disabilities as they transition into higher education. Cory (2011) wrote a chapter for campus administrators about disability services offices and their use as a resource for college students with disabilities. Within the chapter, Cory explains the importance of all student affairs professionals understanding the resources and support offered by the disability service office. Another

aspect included in the disability service office and its connection to the larger campus is the practitioners' ability to reach out into the other sectors of the university (Cory, 2001). Additionally, more needs to be done to include students with disabilities as a part of the campus' diversity. According to Cory (2001), "When campuses included disability in their conversations about diversity, they start to see that including individuals with disabilities as students, faculty and staff enhances the campus"(p. 34).

Stack-Cutler, Parrila, Jokisaari, and Nurmi (2015) researched the support provided to university students with reading difficulties. They studied 107 students who identified having reading difficulties. While discussing the results, 83 students mentioned specific institutional resources as an outlet for support (Stack-Cutler et al., 2015). Within the study, Stack-Cutler and colleagues listed academic-related centers, university general services, university personnel, off-campus activities, health and counseling services, community organizations, online connections, and non-university personnel as institutional outlets. Though students did mention these institutional resources, overall, the institutional supports were mentioned less by participants than the students' informal or peer supports (Stack-Cutler et al., 2015). This shows that though students are aware of the institutional supports available, more could be done to make them more relevant or helpful to the students they are trying to support and perhaps there are opportunities to connect students with disabilities to each other, since peers are more important than institutional supports.

Abreau, Hillier, Frye, and Goldstien (2016) studied university students' experiences using the disability support services offered to them at their university. They surveyed 93 students registered with disability services who attended a four-year

university (Abreau et al., 2016). Abreau and colleagues found a majority of the surveyed students only visited the office of disability services to establish accommodations, and the overall support services provided by the office were not being fully utilized. Some students did appear to seek out the disability services office for social even though the office did not explicitly offer social support (Abreau et al., 2016). Abreau and colleagues concluded by explaining their results show students do see some value in the institutional resource provided, however, the services aren't being fully explored or utilized and there should be more of an active effort within these disability support offices to provide the full-range of support they are set up for.

Influences of Persistence

Throughout the research related to college students and college students with disabilities, their commonalities that have been identified as influencing student persistence (Herbert et al., 2014; Lee, Rojewski, Gregg, & Jeong, 2015; Madaus, Grigal, & Hughes, 2014; Showers & Kinsman, 2017; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015; Suhre, Jansen, & Harksamp, 2007). These include the individual student's family background, characteristics, race and disability. They also include financial aid and satisfaction with the program they have selected.

Family background. A college student's family background along with their race and socioeconomic status have all been confirmed as factors that influence a student's likelihood to persist (Lee et al., 2015; Madaus et al., 2014; Showers & Kinsman 2017; Stewart et al., 2015). Madaus, Grigal, and Hughes (2014) wrote an academic paper on low-income college students with disabilities and their access to, and persistence in postsecondary education. They discussed the impacts their disability had on college

expectation, poverty/financial aid, and individual student characteristics in relation to student success and persistence (Madaus et al., 2014). Within their research, Madaus and colleagues (2014) discussed how socioeconomic status and family background can directly affect student persistence. They explained how students who have a lower socioeconomic status are more likely to attend schools that have limited resources, thus making it more difficult for students with disabilities to receive the institutional support necessary to be successful and persist (Madaus et al., 2014). Lee, Rojewski, Gregg, and Jeong (2015) studied factors that influence persistence of college students with specific learning disabilities at the University of Georgia. This was a quantitative study that used many different databases and supported previous research which stated that students with learning disabilities persisted at lower rates compared to students without disabilities (Lee et al., 2015). Another conclusion was that a disability may pose a barrier to student persistence because of self-perception and self-efficacy and that external social support is a crucial factor influencing the persistence of this population (Lee et al., 2015). According to Lee and colleagues (2015), socioeconomic status was a major factor influencing students with disabilities. These findings suggest that differences in parenting and access to academic resources have a direct effect on students with disabilities and their persistence (Lee et al., 2015).

Showers and Kinsman (2017) specifically studied college students with learning disabilities and what influences their success and persistence. Researchers hoped to learn what role family and student characteristics played in the academic success of college students with learning disabilities. Showers and Kinsman used the ELS:2002 data, which is a national longitudinal study that follows students from high school into college.

Showers and Kinsman (2017) found that family background directly influences the students' attributes which is a major factor while studying student persistence (Showers & Kinsman, 2017). In this study Showers and Kinsman defined student attributes including student expectation, standardized test composite score, standardized math score, and time to enrollment. This study aligned with and confirmed most of the other research exploring family background and student attributes in connection to their college persistence.

Student characteristics. A student's individual characteristics have been connected to their ability to persist and graduate college (Herbert et al., 2014; Madaus et al., 2014; Showers & Kinsman, 2017). Madaus and colleagues (2014) discussed a common thread in their research where students who had certain characteristics were more likely to persist when they faced risk factors like disabilities. For example, students with resilience or grit along with self-confidence were more likely to graduate even if they faced multiple risk factors to their persistence like their disability and a low socioeconomic status (Madaus et al., 2014).

Another study found similar results associated with individual characteristics of students and their ability to persist in a postsecondary institution. Herbert and colleagues (2014) studied the demographic make-up of students seeking and using the office of disability services. Researchers studied students who sought out disability services at a university in the Mid-Atlantic in the United States where combined enrollment of the university was around 45,000 students (Herbert et al., 2014). Specifically, this study explored the relationship between requesting and receiving accommodations as a persistence factor for college students with disabilities (Herbert et al., 2014). Other

variables Herbert and colleagues explored were GPA, housing type, and financial support. This quantitative study found over half of the students initially seeking supports did not receive them because they either did not present proper paperwork, did not follow proper guidelines, or followed protocols but outside supports were not deemed necessary for the specific students (Herbert et al., 2014). Herbert et al. raised questions about what other factors might influence persistence and graduation of students with disabilities outside use of the Office of Disability services.

Showers and Kinsman (2017) found a connection between individuals' attitudes and their persistence. Individual student attributes in this study that showed a significant effect on students' ability to persist were their academic preparation, student degree expectations and confidence, and their time to enrollment (Showers & Kinsman, 2017). Overall the research provides insight into the importance of individual confidence, preparation, and expectations in their academic success on the persistence rates of students with disabilities.

Disability Status Identification. The status of students' disability and their perceptions of their own abilities surfaced in the research as an influential persistence factor (Madaus et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2015). According to Evans and Colleagues (2017) "the number of students who identify themselves as disabled to disability resource offices (DROs) decreases significantly between high school and postsecondary enrollment" (p. 156). This lack of identification to the universities can pose a barrier to the students' overall persistence. Self-perception and a disability's impact on goals or achievement is shown within the research. Madaus, Grigal, and Hughes (2014) also discussed the influence of students' disabilities on their own self-perception and goals. Students who

hold higher expectations and aspirations for career and academic success are shown to have higher persistence rates (Madaus et al., 2014). Lee and colleagues (2015) confirmed previous research which explored the relationship between a students' disability status and the risk that posed to their persistence. When a student acknowledges their disability status, they are more likely to experience barriers or outright failure along the way (Lee et al., 2015). Though this isn't always the case for students, and many students with disabilities continue to persist in postsecondary education, it does need to be considered that a student's disability status can produce a negative persistence factor.

Race. Stewart, Lim, and Kim (2015) studied which factors influence college persistence for first-time students using 3,213 participants from a large four-year public university. Stewart and colleagues found students' race/ethnicity has a major effect on their persistence. They explained the importance of student affairs professionals to create support groups and opportunities to assist students from minority groups in relation to improving student overall persistence. Researchers concluded by explaining that the more students are prepared for their transition and given the tools for success, the more likely they will be to persist (Stewart et al., 2015). While this research highlights the challenge faced by minority students, adding an additional risk-factor like a disability heightens the effect of a barrier to persistence. According to Evans et al., (2017) there is a distinction in postsecondary education between diagnosis and receipt of support services between minority students and white students. Students of color are less likely to receive an accurate diagnosis and are less likely to receive the correct support services and accommodations (Evans et al., 2017). Evans and colleagues explain, "racially and ethnically diverse students experience a greater amount of misdiagnosis and

underdiagnoses than their White peers” (p. 160). The combination of risk factors for minority students with disabilities cannot be ignored and must be actively discussed and explored while initiating new programs and policies to support persistence within these student groups.

Financial aid. Access to financial aid and financial aid status was another persistence factor that appeared throughout the research related to college students with disabilities. Stewart and colleagues (2015) also connected the relationship between financial aid status and student persistence to federal aid eligibility requirements within their research. Their study found consistent results to previous studies confirming financial aid status as a persistence factor (Stewart et al., 2015). Stewart and colleagues felt there were connections between the federal government's standards requiring a certain GPA and completion status to keep federal aid a factor that influences students' abilities to persist. Per federal regulations, students are required to maintain at least a 2.0 cumulative GPA, 67% completion rate, and have attempted less than 180 credit hours in order to remain eligible for federal aid. This can negatively affect a student's ability to persist because if their academics suffer, and they lose federal aid eligibility they are left with minimal options for paying for college. Madaus and colleagues (2014) further explained the role of federal student aid and its effects on college students with disabilities. Students with disabilities may experience additional costs and fees connected to their disabilities while attending college that may not be factored into their Cost of Attendance or Financial Aid Package (Madaus et al., 2014). According to Madaus and colleagues, students can't be charged for basic accommodations, however accommodations that go beyond “basic” or “standard” can accrue additional fees for

students. Working with specific tutors on a continual basis, working with writing or learning specialists, and hiring an academic coach are examples of supports that go beyond what ADA determines to be reasonable accommodations. This high cost can eventually become a barrier to college students with disabilities ability to graduate.

Degree program satisfaction. Some researchers have studied how students' degree program satisfaction affects their persistence (Suhre et al., 2007; Madaus et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2015). One study, specifically explored this variable while studying all college students. Suhre, Jansen, and Harskamp (2007) studied 186 law students to determine if their degree program satisfaction was a factor contributing to their persistence. Researchers found the main variables affecting college persistence within their sample was academic ability, degree program satisfaction, motivation, study skills/habits, and tutorial attendance (Suhre et al., 2007). The researchers concluded by urging professors to adjust their teaching style to better motivate and increase the satisfaction of students enrolled in the degree program. Even though this study was not specific to students with disabilities, it still highlights the importance of satisfaction with current degree program in relation to college student persistence. Another more recent study did specifically discuss degree program satisfaction as a persistence factor for college students with disabilities (Madaus et al., 2014). This research was specific to students with disabilities and found that degree-program satisfaction is a part of the school factors and influences on student achievement and persistence (Madaus et al., 2014).

Another group of researchers studied the persistence factors of college students with learning disabilities which also showed a relationship between degree program

satisfaction and student persistence. In relation to degree program satisfaction, Lee and colleagues (2015) found that students' occupational aspirations paired with their satisfaction in their current degree program is an influencing factor of students with disabilities' persistence.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is frequently studied in connection to student retention research. College students with disabilities are no exception when it comes to their need to find their sense of belonging on campus. A student's connection to campus, and the overall climate of the college are shown to affect a students' sense of belonging.

Connection to campus. Throughout the literature, a student's connection to the campus and campus community is a major factor when it comes to their sense of belonging (Hartley, 2011; Masika & Jones, 2016; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; O'Keefe, 2013). O'Keefe (2013) wrote a paper exploring research related to the importance of sense of belonging in relation to college students' persistence within higher education. Within the paper, students with disabilities are listed as students at risk of non-completion for a number of reasons (O'Keefe, 2013). O'Keefe concludes by highlighting how important it is for students to create a connection to their campus and the campus community. The feeling of being rejected by a campus or the community is a leading cause of non-completion for at-risk students (O'Keefe, 2013). Another study conducted by Hartley (2011) researched sense of belonging, mental health, and academic persistence. Hartley explored the relationship between resilience, mental health and academic persistence in college students. This research surveyed 605 undergraduate students at two large, midwestern, research universities. Hartley found that sense of

belonging was one important variable among other variables like student resilience and GPA that affected academic persistence of college students.

Morrow and Ackerman (2012) studied the intention to persist and the retention of first-year students using motivation and sense of belonging as the variables. Their research used 960 first-year undergraduate students as participants (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). According to Morrow and Ackerman, student connection to their university is important to their overall persistence. Results from this study found that support of faculty members had a significant positive relationship to sense of belonging and motivation of first-year students to persist (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). These results do also relate to college students with learning disabilities; connecting with faculty may be a challenge for a student with a learning disability, especially if they are unwilling to disclose it and end up struggling in the class. However, the student who does disclose the disability and establishes a positive relationship with the instructor is likely to be further motivated and work harder to be successful knowing they have the support of their professor. Additionally, Morrow and Ackerman found that peer support positively contributed to sense of belonging and intent to persist.

While research has considered how to increase student sense of belonging outside of the classroom, one study explored strategies for increasing sense of belonging for students within their classes. Masika and Jones (2016) studied the impact of sense of belonging on students' plan to persist in their degree program. More specifically, Masika and Jones investigated which aspects of a student's experience contributed to their sense of belonging. Results found groupwork and online communication led to a sense of belonging for students within their classes (Masika & Jones, 2016). This research may

influence students with learning disabilities, because they are often more apprehensive about working with their peers for fear of their disability being discovered. Unless students have developed into the last stage or category of the theories discussed above, they face a real challenge with their self-consciousness of their disability. Overall, peer to peer interaction and collaboration was shown to impact sense of belonging within the classroom the most (Masika & Jones, 2016). Though this may be more intimidating for students with learning disabilities, it may allow an opportunity for students to further move through their identity development if they do establish a sense of belonging with their classmates.

Climate. Campus climate has also been studied while exploring sense of belonging for students with disabilities. Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) studied eight students with a disability using semi-structured interviews. The purpose of their study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of these students (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Hutcheon and Wolbring found that students felt the social experiences and constructs affected their experience while at college. More specifically, students felt the campus environment and climate usually accommodated their nondisabled peers in social situations opposed to being comfortable and accommodated themselves (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Evans and colleagues (2017) discussed, in great detail, the importance of campus climate for students with disabilities. The importance of campus climate and students with disabilities' perceptions of their campus climate is directly connected to sense of belonging because students cannot develop a connection to their campus community if they feel their campus is a hostile or apathetic environment toward students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017). On a college campus, students' interaction with

peers and faculty were important factors when students with disabilities evaluated campus climate (Evans et al., 2017). Evans and colleagues connected a positive, inclusive climate to persistence of college students with disabilities. Evans and colleagues conclude their chapter by emphasizing the important obligation of educators and student affairs professionals to help shape a positive and inclusive climate for students with disabilities at their college campuses.

Social Student Experience

Though students with disabilities attend postsecondary education with academic goals and intention to receive a degree, there are many aspects of the college experience that are social in nature. Research has shown that social integration and informal supports like friends and family can actually influence the academic achievement and intent to persist for college students with disabilities (Couzens et al., 2015; DaDeppo, 2009; Dryer, Henning, Tyson & Shaw, 2016; Lombardi, Murray & Kowitt, 2016; Mamisesishvili & Koch, 2011).

Student social integration. Some research focused on the impact of social integration for college students with disabilities (DaDeppo, 2009; Mamisesishvili & Koch, 2011). DaDeppo (2009) studied 97 freshman and sophomores with learning disabilities to determine which factors related to academic success and persistence. More specifically the research focused on the influence of academic and social involvement on the students' overall success and intent to persist (DaDeppo, 2009). Results from the study showed that social integration was more powerful to students with learning disabilities than academic integration. These results confirm previous research which found the same phenomenon. According to DaDeppo, student affairs professionals need

to provide for social integration for students with learning disabilities along with their academic integration as the students are transitioning into college.

Another study researched social integration and how it compared to academic integration while exploring persistence factors and academic success. Mamisesishvili and Koch (2011) explored which factors influenced persistence of college students with disabilities between their first and second year. Researchers used the *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study* (BPS) data set. Results found social integration positively influenced intent to persist for students with and without disabilities (Mamisesishvili & Koch, 2011). According to Mamisesishvili and Koch, even students with disabilities who participated in one or two extra social activities were more likely to persist than students with disabilities who didn't participate in any social extra-curricular activities. Like DaDeppo (2009) confirmed, results from this study also highlighted a stronger influence from social integration for students compared to academic integration (Mamisesishvili & Koch, 2011). At the end of their study, Mamisesishvili and Koch also advised student affairs professionals to support students with disabilities to integrate socially with their peers in order to positively influence the students' persistence.

Peer and family support. Peer and family supports was another common theme that surfaced when researchers explored social support for college students with disabilities. Couzens and colleagues (2015) completed a case study which studied the quality of support provided for students with hidden disabilities at an Australian University. After interviewing students at this university about their experiences, researchers found that many students listed their informal peer support networks as their most effective supports (Couzens et al., 2015). According to Couzens and colleagues, all

the students they interviewed indicated their informal social supports were the most helpful to their success. Some students used their friends to help them navigate situations within their classes while others relied on their friends to help with their study skills and organizational habits (Couzens et al., 2015). Couzens and colleagues explained that the students highlighted the importance of using these informal supports because they felt their friends and peers really understood their experiences navigating college with a disability.

Another study explored the influence of peer support and found some interesting results when discussing peer relationships and academic success. Dryer, Henning, Tyson, and Shaw (2016) studied the influence of non-academic factors on academic success of college students with disabilities using 83 participants who identified as having a disability. There was a unique finding associated with this research; lower satisfaction with social relationships translated to a higher GPA and academic achievement (Dryer, et al., 2016). Though at first this result seems to counteract the results from the previously discussed studies, Dryer and colleagues found that students who identified as having a disability spent more time focusing on their academic work which left less time for socializing. The researchers conclude that social relationships are still important to students with disabilities and highlight the importance of structured social supports like a peer support group for students with disabilities (Dryer et al., 2016).

Lombardi, Murray, and Kowitt (2016) researched the effect of social support on academic outcomes for students with disabilities, while also exploring the influence of different relationship types. Researchers surveyed 200 students registered with disability services at a large public research university in the Pacific Northwest (Lombardi, et al.,

2016). Lombardi and colleagues found that the main social support variable did not consistently connect to students with disabilities academic achievement; however, certain types of social relationships were positively associated with academic success. Overall, the findings highlighted the importance of the type and quality of students' social support when exploring the connection to academic success and persistence of college students with disabilities (Lombardi et al., 2016). Lombardi and colleagues conclude by illustrating the importance of educating students before they begin college on the importance of building a quality group of social supports as they proceed through their transition.

Academic Student Experience

All college students at one point or another will need some sort of assistance. For college students with learning disabilities, they may seek out specific supports to assist with their academic experience; such as requesting accommodations, feeling comfortable with their professors, and maintaining effective study habits. Many of these supports are also tied in to their academic self-efficacy and confidence as well. While in high school, most students with disabilities receive a structured support system through their special education teachers, individualized education plans, and transition planning. However, once students enter college the support is still there, but it's up to the student to request and advocate for their supports.

Accommodations. A majority of the research surrounding college students with disabilities focuses on the students' use or avoidance of university-provided accommodations (Denhart, 2008; Egan & Giuliano, 2009; Hadley, 2017; Newman & Madaus, 2015; Weis, Dean, & Osborne, 2014; Yssel, Pak, & Beilke, 2016). Reluctance

or hesitation to request accommodations due to fear of perceptions and stigmatization was a recurring theme throughout the literature (Denhart, 2008; Egan & Giuliano, 2009; Yssel et al., 2016). Students' fear and hesitation was prevalent in the results of Denhart's (2008) study. Denhart's research identified common ideas shared between students labeled with learning disabilities, their educational barriers, and how they overcame them. The target population of this qualitative study was students with learning disabilities, and the research took place at two colleges in the Pacific Northwest. Denhart found that, in college, students with disabilities also chose to determine what they viewed were their own accommodation needs (Denhart, 2008). This was the first time many of the participants had some control over their accommodation needs. While discussing this new freedom participants confirmed they experienced fear or reluctance to even request accommodations due to their fear of the stigma associated with their disability (Denhart, 2008). Denhart's research compliments Egan and Giuliano's (2009) study. They conducted a study that researched the perceptions and use of academic accommodations in relation to the test performance of college students with learning disabilities. Participants in this study included 69 students with disabilities who also lived on campus. This research found students who request accommodations felt they would be discriminated against by peers and faculty members (Egan & Giuliano, 2009). Requesting accommodations was heavily associated with stigmatization and many students were faced with a "no-win" situation regarding disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations (Egan & Giuliano 2009).

Some studies specifically researched the accommodation decision-making process and the factors related to students receiving these accommodations. For example,

Newman and Madaus (2015) studied factors relating to the receipt of accommodations by college students with disabilities. This study utilized the NLTS2 data, which is nationally funded data. The research was gathered in 2000 and specifically focused on college students with disabilities. Newman and Madaus found that the different disability characteristics, self-determination, high school academic preparation and transition planning experiences, and the student's own self-realization of their needs were all factors related to their accommodation experience in college. That is, when looking at students with learning disabilities, one cannot simply look at just one factor.

Researchers have also studied the decision-making process of disability services officers assigning the accommodations. Weis and colleagues (2014) researched the accommodations offered to community college students with disabilities and the frequency and validity of these accommodation requests in relation to student academic success. This quantitative study surveyed 359 community college students diagnosed with a learning disability who were registered with disability services on campus (Weis et al., 2014). This study found that employees at disability services offices didn't always recommend accommodations that were specialized or unique to individual students. Instead the professionals would have a few go-to accommodations, like extended testing time, that they would recommend to many of the students (Weis et al., 2014). This study found that there were varying degrees of validity while assigning these "popular" accommodations to students. Weis and colleagues found that the student's history and current diagnoses were the strongest predictors of assigned accommodation. Accommodations do have a direct effect on students' academic experiences which is why this research is so crucial to the understanding of college students with disabilities entire

experience. The students are used to receiving directions in high school and this may work better in college if the professionals have a deep enough understanding about the students' histories.

Academic self-efficacy. Another common theme throughout the literature about students' academic experience was how each student's own self-efficacy and perception of their disability influenced their academics. For example, both Denhart (2008) and Hadley (2017) discussed how oral, verbal, and written assignments triggered considerable stress for the students they each researched. From his research, Denhart also identified educational barriers for students with learning disabilities, and how they overcame them; with many students showing concern about reading and writing assignments. Hadley, studied one student who was diagnosed as a child with multiple learning disabilities. Learning to manage more writing assignments was one of the main struggles that the participant faced through his high school to college transition. These types of assignments created a sense of dread and self-consciousness for many students, which greatly affected their academic self-efficacy (Denhart, 2008; Hadley, 2017).

Groupwork was another academic challenge that students faced as identified in the research (Denhart, 2008; Yssel, et al., 2016). Challenges with groupwork effect students' academic self-efficacy because they feel especially self-conscious about their learning disability and academic abilities while working with their peers (Yssel et al., 2016). Yssel, Pak, and Beilke (2016) re-created a study from 1999 which explored the perceptions of college students with disabilities. This research was conducted at a mid-sized university in the Midwest and utilized a qualitative approach; twelve students were interviewed throughout the research. The participants explained their challenges with

groupwork because they felt they had verbal communication complications, thought differently than their peers, or just overall cited group work specifically as a challenge. Students also were determined to be independent and held a self-determined desire to be like everyone else (Yssel et al., 2016). Because these college students with disabilities experienced interpersonal complications and misunderstandings through their group work, they did not feel as confident in their ability to participate in the group.

Like group assignments affecting their self-efficacy, a students' own emotional intelligence was also linked to academic self-efficacy in college students with learning disabilities. Hen and Goroshit (2014) researched the relationship between a student's emotional intelligence and their academic success and compared this between the respondents who were diagnosed with a learning disability and those who were not. A convenience sample of 287 second-year students was surveyed for this quantitative study. Because this study looked at both students with and without a diagnosed learning disability, 35% of the respondents were students diagnosed with a learning disability. Results from this research showed a strong connection between emotional intelligence and GPA (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Ultimately, these students struggled within themselves to feel confident in their academic abilities, and this emotional aspect did play a large role in their overall academic experience (Hen & Goroshit, 2014).

Academic study habits. Developing study habits is a challenge for any new college student, and for a student with a learning disability who has come from a structured environment this may be quite difficult if no formal support is provided. Study skills and habits, like writing, verbal communication, and procrastination were also discussed in the literature relating to college students with disabilities academic

experience (Denhart, 2008; Hadley, 2017; Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Findings from some research showed that their challenges connected to assignments like those listed above affected their academic experience (Denhart, 2008; Hadley, 2017; Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Students identify oral and written assignments, verbal communication, and thinking about things differently as barriers to their academic success. Some research broke down the challenges students faced into the different assignments that participants particularly struggled with in their courses. Hadley (2017), explored the connection with writing assignments and time-management skills, and identified that learning to manage more writing assignments was one of the main struggles experienced through their high school to college transition. Denhart (2008) also discussed challenges college students with learning disabilities faced in relation to writing assignments. While, Hen and Goroshit (2014) found procrastination as an academic influence and predictor of GPA for their participants.

Faculty and staff student relationships. Though the students have a lot of control over their academic experience through accommodations, study habits, and their confidence, how faculty and staff react to the disclosure of their disability affects their academic experience (Hong, 2015; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Yessel et al., 2016). Faculty and staff relationships with college students with disabilities strongly shaped their academic experiences (Hong, 2015; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; Yessel et al., 2016). In Yessel, Pak, and Bilke's (2016) study, the researchers also discovered a sharp contrast between the 1999 results and the 2016 research regarding faculty-student relationships for students with disabilities. Participants reported positive feedback and faculty willingness to provide accommodations as helpful (Yessel et al., 2016). An

approachable and positive instructor-student relationship was also cited as a change since the previous study, which Yssel and colleagues used to show what may be some progress by faculty to be more accommodating.

Mamiseishvili and Koch's (2011) also explored college students with learning disabilities and their relationships with professors. The researchers specifically focused on students with learning disabilities approaching their professors or seeking out assistance. Mamiseishvili and Koch researched the characteristics of college students with disabilities and factors influencing their persistence, utilizing the *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study* data set. Results identified that the average age of the 1,910 participants was 24, higher than your typical average student population (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). This information is important because older students may have different needs or expectations throughout their college experience compared to a traditional-aged student. After analysis, a relationship emerged between social integration having a positive effect on student persistence. Though, social integration was a key factor reported, the results also showed influential factors related to student's academic experience. They identified in their study, "14.7% never had any contact with faculty outside of class and never participated in study groups in their first year of college" (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011, p. 101). This is a small percentage so though the 14% is hesitant to connect with faculty outside of class, this may be a positive statistic with the other 85.3% of college students with learning disabilities taking the initiative and pushing past their fear of the stigma to reach out to their professors.

This research aligns with Hong's (2015) research where participants perceived they were treated differently by their professors compared to their non-disabled peers.

Hong researched what barriers students with disabilities faced as they transitioned into the higher education environment. This study examined students with disabilities who participated with campus disability services. Hong created a qualitative study that used reflective journaling by the students to gather data. The study found four main themes that emerged in the journals; revealing that students were worried about their new professors' perceptions at the beginning of each semester. Students felt they were misunderstood, or professors held lower expectations for their work once they disclosed their disability (Hong, 2015). While working with other staff on campus, students also experienced strained relationships; for example, students described uninformed and apathetic academic advisors (Hong, 2015). Overall, the academic experience of college students with disabilities was greatly influenced by their interactions and relationships with faculty and staff.

Postsecondary academic predictors. Other research has shown students' academic success can be predicted through studying other variables. Some research relating to students' academic experience focused on certain academic predictors (Dadeppo, 2009; Doren, Gau and Lindstrom, 2012; Joshi & Bouck, 2017). For example, Dadeppo (2009) researched the importance of both academic and social integration and their impact on overall student persistence for students with disabilities. This quantitative study looked at 97 college freshmen and sophomores who were diagnosed with a learning disability; researchers used SAT or ACT scores, high school GPA, college GPA, a researcher-designed questionnaire, and the *Freshman Year Survey* as measures for their research. Results of this study showed a positive correlation between high school GPA and college GPAs for students with learning disabilities (Dadeppo, 2009). Along with

high school GPA, the students' high school class schedule was also shown to be a factor. Joshi and Bouck (2017) found that students who were included in general education classes in high school were more likely to attend and persist in a college environment. Their research specifically explored postsecondary education predictors for college students with learning disabilities (Joshi & Bouck, 2017). Joshi and Bouck used the NLTS2 data to come up with their results related to this population specifically as part of a larger study.

Another academic predictor explored was parent expectations of students with learning disabilities. Doren, Gau, and Lindstrom (2012) found parent expectations for student success in college was positively associated with a successful academic experience of college students with disabilities. This study was also a secondary analysis of the NLTS2 data similar to Joshi and Bouck. This study had three objectives; 1) to look at the impact parent expectations had on actual outcomes of students with disabilities; 2) examine which demographic information affected the previously stated outcome; 3) to look at how the variable of student autonomy affected the relationship between post-high school outcomes and parent expectations. Results of the analysis showed that 65% of parents of students with learning disabilities had expectations of students attending postsecondary education. This was the highest result compared to parents of individuals with other types of disabilities. This may mean that when students with learning disabilities transition into college, they have a stronger support system from their parents than college students with other disabilities.

Summary

The civil rights movement, along with other historical periods led to a momentum of advocacy and change for people with disabilities which led to the induction of specific laws that increased postsecondary education access for individuals with disabilities.

When researchers explore support provided to students with disabilities, they usually look at the institutional resources specifically provided to those students. While exploring persistence factors for college students with disabilities, a student's family background, characteristics, race, disability status, financial aid eligibility and degree program satisfaction were listed as influencing factors. A student's sense of belonging on a college campus is shown to be influenced by their individual connection to the campus and the overall campus climate. Throughout the literature, researchers compared the impact of students with disabilities academic integration versus their social integration both social and academic integration were persistence factors.

Chapter III

Methods

This research study was conducted through qualitative methods to include students' perspectives within the current research conversation regarding college students diagnosed with a learning disability. Specifically, this study was meant to determine which persistence factors are most influential to these students' transitions into college. This chapter discusses the plan for gathering and analyzing data. It will also provide a description of the participants and research site within this chapter.

Design of the Study

This study used a qualitative narrative approach. Krefting (1991) described qualitative research as research that contains subjective ideas and meanings, and the perceptions of the individuals. Qualitative research focuses on human experiences and the perceptions participants have about these experiences (Krefting, 1991). The narrative approach is used here to understand the unique perspectives and experiences of college students with learning disabilities in their own voices. Polkinghorne (1988) described the narrative interview as a means to explore in-depth a participant's story and uncover their life experiences and events. Kim (2015) also described the strengths of utilizing the narrative approach by explaining that researchers understand their own lives through their stories which is why using a participant's story to understand their experiences is so relevant. To collect data, the researcher interviewed participants to collect and analyze the students' thoughts and feelings about their experiences.

Research Site

Research was conducted at a midsized university located in the rural Midwest named Midwest University. Current enrollment for this university is 7,415. About 350 self-identifying students use the Office of Disability Services on campus each year. According to the Office of Disabilities Services, students with learning disabilities are the most common disability registered with their office on campus. According to the department's mission, "The Office of Disability Services is committed to facilitating the provision of equal access and opportunity to all campus programs and services for students with disabilities." The campus also provides an autism support program. According to the department's mission, "The autism support program focuses on providing enhanced support in three main skill set areas. A solid foundation of Academic, Social, and Daily-living (ASD) skill sets is crucial for the success of post-secondary students." This autism support program costs the students \$3000 a year, if they are fully enrolled and \$1500 a year if they are in the maintenance program. These costs are in addition to their other expenses for tuition, housing, and fees. This program provides a support framework for the students by pairing students with peer-mentors for social and academic support as well as weekly academic meetings with someone within the autism support program. Interviews were conducted in a location decided by the participant that was also a conducive environment for interviewing and protected the participant's identity and reason for involvement in the study.

Participants

This study included two participants who identified as having a learning disability, and who completed at least two semesters in college at the time of data

collection. Because this is a narrative study, the focus of this research was an in-depth focus on the participants experiences. Due to the narrative format, quality of interviews was valued over quantity of participants. This was done to understand how they are adjusting and using resources in that first year specifically. There was a chance that during the interview participants identified that they do not utilize any resources and that presented the opportunity to encourage them to consider accessing those services as they proceed forward with the rest of their time in college. To build rapport and gain trust from participants, the researcher attempted to remove as much of a power disparity between the researcher and the participant by giving them control over location and time of the interview.

To recruit participants, the researcher attempted to go through Midwest University's Office of Disability Services. However, that strategy did not recruit any participants for this research. When this did not work the researcher reached out to colleagues who work closely with students in a variety of offices across campus to provide names of students who may fit the participant criteria. After determining potential participants from colleagues, the researcher contacted these participants through email (Appendix A). Two participants who met the qualifications were interviewed.

Lucas. Lucas is a sophomore majoring in Communication Studies with a focus in Mass Communication. He was diagnosed with a learning disability and autism at a young age. Though Lucas was recommended for this study through a professional who confirmed his testing indicates a learning disability, Lucas mainly identifies with his autism diagnosis. More information about Lucas, his background, and his diagnosis will be discussed in the narrative chapter of this study.

Lexi. Lexi is a junior majoring in Marketing with an emphasis in East Asian Studies with hopes to work within international business someday. Lexi is an active student leader who was diagnosed with a learning disability, specifically ADHD, when she was ten years old. Lexi's background and transition story will also be discussed in further detail in the narrative chapter of this study.

Interview Protocol

In this study, instrumentation included a set of pre-determined interview protocol (see appendix B) which guided the conversation by the researcher. Each participant was asked the same questions which were designed to understand the participant experience and persistence factors for college students with learning disabilities. The researcher was intentional in making a majority of the questions open-ended as a way to explore the students' perspectives and true feelings in their experiences as much as possible. The protocol was intentionally designed not to ask participants in depth questions about their disability, rather it was to understand their transition and use of resources. After the initial interviews were conducted, the researcher left it open that participants could receive requests for follow-up meetings or interviews to further explore the student's experiences.

Data Collection

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews. The researcher collected data by transcribing and coding the semi-structured interviews conducted with participants of this research. The researcher interviewed each participant one time and the interviews took the participants about two hours to complete.

Treatment of Data

After completing the interviews, the data was transcribed into Word documents by the researcher. The audio recordings of these interview sessions were coded using qualitative coding. All names of participants, institutions, and specifically named individuals were changed to protect everyone's privacy. Instead of names, participant information is presented using pseudonyms chosen by the participant. Data is stored on a password-protected computer. All data will be kept for at least three years at which time it will be destroyed per IRB standards.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed in a word document saved on the researcher's password protected computer. Following transcription, the research was qualitatively coded to uncover emerging themes and ideas. In order to code the data, the researcher went through each transcript and determined which responses emerged as a common theme. While completing the coding process, the researcher sought guidance from their thesis advisor to help eliminate as much bias as possible. The researcher also utilized the transcripts and coded data to determine the narrative aspect of the research by determining which quotations and ideas from the participants provided an in-depth look into the participants experiences with their learning disability and their transition.

Summary

This qualitative research was completed using interviews to determine participant perspectives and reflections at a public, rural, mid-sized Midwestern university. Measures were taken to ensure the participant's privacy is protected throughout the entire research

process. Once the data was collected, the researcher transcribed and analyzed data to determine themes and meaning.

CHAPTER IV

Narrative

This chapter will examine the narratives of both participants while providing insight into their experiences. Each participants' interview described their background, high school preparation, college transition, and the college services and resources used. Through describing their background and use of participant quotations, this chapter will provide a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences before the analysis of the interviews in reference to the research questions in chapter five.

Lucas

Lucas is a Caucasian, 20-year-old student from a mid-sized city in Illinois. Lucas is majoring in Communication with a focus on Mass Communication. Specifically, he hopes to work within the career field of television and film production. He attended a high school of around 400 students. He was diagnosed with both autism and a learning disability at a young age. When asked about what it was like to learn and understand his diagnosis Lucas shared:

I get it, little old me was definitely more affected by the autism more than I am now but like still I was just kind of like. I look back on myself and I'm like ugh, you did that. Why did you do that? But in all seriousness, I absolutely had a rough time trying to get pals just because I had a hard time understanding people.

While discussing his disability, Lucas mainly identified with his autism diagnosis. He even, when specifically questioned, never disclosed his learning disability. He receives support through an on-campus autism transition support program.

Growing up, Lucas had to navigate his parent's divorce. He shared,

I should mention in terms of the relation between my mother and father overall, I would have to describe my childhood as an ignorant lie per se. Because, don't get me wrong, they were very nice to me at least, in like they are both very nice for the most part. But like due to my dad being the very aggressive and like straightforward man that he is, eventually the relationship didn't work out. First, he lived with his mother and eventually moved instead into his father's house.

High school experience. When asked about his high school experience, Lucas described his high school experience in two parts. The first part was his freshman and sophomore year of high school. In this portion, he said he really focused on his academic classes and getting as many of the required academic courses completed as soon as he could. He shared, "I pretty much willingly sacrificed those years where I had all of the harder classes... Just in the sense of like they had to be done so that way you don't have to do them in college." In the second half of his high school career (junior and senior year), Lucas described having more free-time to work at other places during the school-day. He discussed,

Due to my awesome strategy, by the time my junior and senior year hit in, I had a slot in my schedule that I didn't really need. So, they were like hey, you are awesome, and you have autism. Would you like to be able to be in this one program that will fill up a period for you and you can just work?

He appreciated the opportunity to gain real-life work experience while he was still in high school. Lucas described his high school as being a very good school for students with disabilities though he positioned himself as a student who had higher-functioning autism. He shared,

My school was a pretty good school for people with disabilities... It's just that for me I just kind of quickly grew out of that group. Because I'm a super-social individual, despite my introverted personality. So, they never really saw me as like someone with disabilities, they just saw me as another student.

Lucas did have an IEP during his K-12 education experience. When asked to describe those IEP meetings he provided a very positive image of his experiences. He shared, "They would kind of like throw me in a room and be like hey you do pretty great out here, and I'm like thanks man. I appreciate that." He also accredited the IEP meetings as when he first really became aware of his own disability. He stated, "I think I started kind of getting a grasp of it whenever the IEPs would happen I guess." Lucas credits his guidance counselor and speech pathologist for their recommendations that he consider attending Midwest University for the support that would be provided by the autism support program. He shared,

I had another person that was pretty much like a speech person...And the counselor for my high school were both nice and they really helped me out with deciding, Oh Midwest University has the autism support program, they'd probably be able to help you transition to college without too many problems.

Lucas also received guidance from his mom and older sisters who attended college. When asked if his IEP helped with his college preparation, he revealed, "To some degree but like the majority of the actually [*sic*] college preparation was through my mother and through my sister."

College transition. When asked about his transition into college, Lucas stated, "I would say that I also learned that I can be independent and do things on my own even if I

do still get help through certain things like the autism support program." He mentioned, he had researched what he felt he would need to know so that kept him calm and confident during those first few weeks. He described his transition as being, "pretty smooth for someone transitioning to college for the first time ever." During this transition period, he said he relied on support from his family, mainly his older sister and mom. Though building a support group from peers was always something that Lucas struggled with due to his autism diagnosis, he initially formed a group of peers through the autism support program. While describing the other autism support program students, he said, "Overall they were nice people in there, and they were certainly people that I did get along with overall, aside from like occasional incidents. But hey, other than that they were all nice people." Lucas described the other students within the autism support program in a similar manner to students with disabilities he encountered in high school, Lucas shared, "Even though I am aware that I have a disability I kind of don't get along that well with other people with disabilities as stupid as that sounds. More so if they're just a little bit lower-functioning." He also described himself to professors as a student with high-functioning autism when he delivered his accommodation letters. He said,

When I hand in my accommodation paperwork and I say, hey my name is Lucas and I'm just letting you know I have my accommodation papers since I have autism. I am high functioning so I'm not going to be a big pain in your butt. I'm just letting you know.

Lucas described the experience he had when he joined clubs on campus like a gaming group and a media club as a better environment for him to meet other students on campus. Lucas shared, "Those were people that I was able to enjoy because I was making

content in terms of videos overall. It was a really nice landing point for other interests.” Lucas described how both of these organizations provided him with the opportunity to connect with other students and build friend relationships through their shared interests. Because he used the different supports and college services, Lucas feels he’s found his place on campus and even holds leadership roles on campus. Specifically, he is a resident assistant in one of the on-campus residence halls and he is also the vice president for the gaming group. When asked to explain some of his most rewarding moments since coming to campus, Lucas shared,

First, I am proud of becoming the Vice President of the gaming group. That club is a major part of what I do here, and I would say that I’ve put a lot of time and kind of plan to keep it as awesome as it possibly can be...I would also say I’m very excited and grateful about becoming a resident assistant.

Both are positions he’s very proud to have obtained.

College services utilized. While discussing his college transition, Lucas described multiple college services that supported him throughout his transition. The autism support program was the main area of support Lucas identified using when he transitioned into college. He described the different aspects of the program, like help with requesting accommodations, being paired with a peer mentor, and support with many other social and academic aspects of the transition. Because he is a student within the autism support program, Lucas is registered with the Office of Disability Services on campus and does request and receive accommodations within his coursework. Lucas also discussed other college services that he used during his first year of college. He used the campus shuttle because he didn’t have a car, Midwest University website, his freshman

year Resident Assistant, and the front-desk services within his residence hall his freshman year.

Lexi

Lexi is a Caucasian junior who grew up in a small town in central Illinois. She is a Marketing major with an East Asian Studies minor who hopes to work within the field of international business. When asked about her on-campus involvement, she shared, “I’m on the executive board and I’m the marketing coordinator for a club. I also work two jobs. I am a student worker and then I’m a social media intern for a student affairs office.” When asked to describe herself, Lexi also shared, “I love people. I love to talk to people. I am a huge animal lover. I love animals and I try to be a good student. I try.” Lexi was diagnosed with her learning disability, ADHD at a young age. Describing that experience, Lexi stated,

I was a second grader and I was going to third grade, so probably like nine or ten. I was diagnosed at a very fairly young age and so I got diagnosed because it is genetic. So like if, my sister didn't have it, then I wouldn't have been diagnosed. And we were in the age where with depression, anxiety and learning disabilities you take the pill and it solves all your problems. That was kind of the protocol, which was the answer to it. I was put on medicine at a young age. So I started getting put on medicine and usually you don't see kids put on ADHD medicine until they're around the age of 12. So I was fairly young when I was put on it and it was because I was hyperactive so they kind of did it to basically calm me down.

In the interview, Lexi also described what living, and studying with ADHD was like:

If it's a timed exam and I only have one chance to read it once, I'm like crap. So I'm like fast reading it so I can read it, read it, read it. And then it affects me, a lot of people are like, you're so smart and everything and I'm like, I am smart, I am fairly intelligent. I try to be, but I do have this disability that does affect my learning ability and I had to learn how to not learn like you.

Though she has faced challenges with her disability, she described in the interview how she has learned to view her disability. She shared,

And honestly now I don't let my disability stop me. I kind of use it to my advantage because it's not really a disability. It's just like I kind of think differently than everybody else and it took me, it took me till I got to college to realize this.

High school experience. Due to a divorce and moving from one parent's home to another, Lexi attended two different high schools. When asked about her high school preparation for college Lexi shared,

I had one teacher who basically said "I used to be a college professor so I'm going to kick it up a notch because I'm going to be worse than your college professors because I want you to be able to handle college."

She also explained that though she was an honors student in high school, she did feel challenged because of her ADHD. She shared,

Even though I have ADHD, I had to spend what would take an average honors student just an hour to do homework, it would take me three hours to do, but I would get it done. So I was spending a lot of time to do it, to get it. I worked hard for my book smarts and everything.

She acknowledged that her honor's classes were really the most influential piece of her high school preparation for college,

I'm grateful for being in the honors program because I actually did take two college-level classes my senior year. That really helped me prepare for college because it showed me what they did and everything and it made me realize that the teacher was really trying to help me.

In the interview Lexi reflected positively on those honors classes, but she identified that for her it wasn't quite enough college preparation.

So I really only had one teacher for one year who really helped me prepare. And that's really not enough. Like they say in college high school was to prepare you. They really don't. They don't prepare you for college. They prepare you to get by to graduate.

When asked if she used an IEP in high school, Lexi shared, "I don't even know what that is. So. No." Once she understood the definition, she further shared that she wasn't able to provide an updated and more recent diagnosis to her school to receive an IEP and accommodations. She shared,

The problem with it now is like when you tell people that you have ADHD, they don't believe you. So they make you go get a new examination, like an up-to-date examination and those cost money and I come from a low-middle class family and our insurance won't cover that because it's not a necessity.

Though Lexi described finding her own success without being registered for disability services, she also identified that she wished she had access to requesting accommodations, just in case she wasn't doing as well.

College transition. When asked about her first few weeks in college, Lexi shared that she spent the first few weeks trying to figure out how to navigate the new academic workload. She shared that it mostly came down to time management and how she struggles with that because of her ADHD. She shared, “Time management was a huge thing. So I became so focused and that's another thing. I am the type of my disability, I'm like I have to focus on one thing until I get it done.” Lexi went on to share that after an adjustment period and some help from her peer supports and professors she was able to navigate the semester and reflect back on her first semester as a success. She shared,

I didn't really get any preparations so like my first semester here I had to kick butt and I'm glad I did. I still got a 3.96 GPA and I was just like, keep it a 3.9 I'm trying. But. So like I don't think I had a lot of preparations. But not like not a sufficient amount that made me feel like, yeah, I can do college.

While sharing her story, Lexi also discussed the importance of her friends and how they helped her succeed:

I was friends with a lot of people on my floor freshman year and they kind of helped me academically and they would sometimes pull me away from my books. They would suggest taking like a 30-minute break or say, “Lexi, stop eating in your room, let's go eat lunch.” I appreciate them so much because I've been friends with a lot of the girls that I met, and the people I've met and the guys since freshman year and they know me so well. They're like, “Know this, she focuses hard on something. So when she focuses she like basically gets rid of everything else.”

Throughout the interview, Lexi often reflected back to her friends and the role they played in her freshman year transition to college. She also discussed the impact that student involvement had on her college transition. Lexi stated that she did not immediately get involved in extra-curricular activities on campus, and she attributes this to her initial strategy where all she did was homework:

It took me a little bit my freshman year. In high school I was only like really committed to one thing, so I took that brain-set into college and I just focused on one group and it wasn't a group that I was into, it was just like resume-builder and I wasn't looking for that.

Eventually, Lexi did find her place and became involved in the right organizations for her and worked her way up to becoming a leader.

College services utilized. While discussing how she utilizes campus supports and services Lexi mainly described using the support provided by her professors. She also discussed her personal experience with the Office of Disability Services. Lexi shared her struggle with trying to get registered with the Office of Disability Services:

However, when you're from a kind of low-class, middle-class family and they're telling you no, you need to get an updated result for that. That's going to psychiatrist, that's a lot of money. Sometimes it means doing an MRI or doing scans and everything. My family, can't afford it and I feel like after me being diagnosed for so long and me still taking medicine and my doctor knowing this about me and knowing that I still struggle and yet I'm not in their system because it's just too, it's too hard for me to get in the system.

Though she is not registered for accommodations or within the Office of Disability Services, Lexi does utilize any support offered to her from her professors:

My greatest challenge was probably stress management, and also time management. So luckily I was taking a class with Professor Steven. He's a great professor and I love him to death and he took two weeks out of the first period to teach us about time management, how to do it, how to organize ourselves. And that really helped me because I still use it to this day and I still have his planner that he gave me and I love it. I use it every single day. I still use his system of ABC, one, two, three, check mark, X, Arrow. And so my time management improved because of him.

Though Lexi's experiences with the Office of Disability Services and other campus services were different than Lucas' Lexi was able to navigate her transition and find other sources of support from the university through the faculty and staff.

Summary

This chapter explored the narratives of both participants while providing insight into the experiences of both participants. Each participant's narrative focused on their background, high school preparation, college transition, and the college services and resources used. Chapter Five will concentrate on the analysis of their interviews and connect their stories to the research questions presented in this study.

CHAPTER V

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors that influenced the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities at a four-year, mid-sized university. Another purpose was to determine if university services and resources within the institution influenced persistence of college students with learning disabilities. This chapter will explore the findings that surfaced through the participant's interviews. The following research questions were used to guide the study and analysis (a) How do students with learning disabilities at a four-year college persist? (b) What college services and resources contribute to the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities? The use of theoretical framework will also guide analysis of the participant's disability identity.

Persistence Factors

When the participants discussed their transitions, they identified several factors that influenced their persistence. These persistence factors are: academic workload and studying, student perseverance, sense of belonging and student leadership, family and friend support, and disclosure and advocacy. Each of these themes will be explored in detail to provide the unique perspective of the participants about both the strategies and barriers that affected their persistence at Eastern Illinois University.

Academic workload and studying. Both of the participants in this study discussed the academic workload in college and how the combination of the academic workload and how their disability impacted their transition from high school to college. While discussing the difference between the times set aside for homework in high school

versus college Lexi shared, "High school was more like, I usually would come home with no homework to do because I would do it during the day and I got it all done." This was not her experience in college,

I tried to very much stay focused and I focused a little too much where I didn't allow myself to have fun to experience the college life. I didn't do any of those events because I'm so focused on school and in high school I had to be like that to succeed, to be an honor student. I had to be so focused on school that I couldn't think about anything else. And when I got here I kind of took that same thought, but I did it times ten unfortunately.

During our interview, Lexi reflected on how she wished that she had taken the time to enjoy the campus events that many freshman students attend. She shared,

So, I didn't get to really experience life at first, so I was very much focused on my academics, which is fine. But yeah, if I could redo, I would totally have told myself like, "hey, it's okay, don't stress, go out, you can read this chapter later, I don't have to read it two to three times." Like I would usually have to. I could read a question and I wouldn't be able to retain what I read so I would have to read it two to three times just to retain it.

Lucas also discussed the difference between the academic rigors from high school to college. While reflecting on his high school experience he spoke about how he would have certain times set aside during the school day to work on homework which he did not have when he came to college. Lucas shared,

Throughout the entirety of my high school because I had autism, they offered me basically a class where the sole purpose was to do homework so I would have like eight classes and like three of them would be not that bad.

Both participants reported that they felt a difference in the academic workload from high school to college and had to learn how to manage the new amount of rigor in order to persist within their new environment. Studying was also an area that both participants identified as challenging when they started college. While discussing his experience with studying, Lucas said

I'm not going to lie, I'm not the greatest studier, I ain't a fan of it...I'm more of a learner by someone else teaching it and doing it in a more class environment. I just spent a majority of my free time attempting to study and watching YouTube and video games.

Though Lucas stated that studying is not something that he enjoys when asked about strategies he uses to ensure academic success he said,

My general motto in terms of homework is get it done now. Generally, when I get it assigned, I do my best to once I'm finally out of the clutches of class, I get my butt settled down in my chair or wherever the heck I am and just get to work, and then finish it up so I have time to go do more fun things.

He also said, "Generally, I've learned that I need to get my stuff done as soon as I can."

Lexi also identified studying as a barrier she has had to overcome through finding effective study strategies. When asked about her first few weeks of college she said,

My first couple of weeks. Oh man, I had my nose in the book. I was so terrified because of me having ADHD and I have a struggle with time management because with my ADHD time moves a lot quicker for me than for other people.

When describing why she initially spent all her time studying instead of taking time for herself Lexi shared, "Because I wanted to succeed so badly here, and I still do. But I've kind of calmed down, I swear I just, I didn't want to fail, and I didn't want my disability to stop me." Later in our interview, Lexi talked about how she had to teach herself coping and studying strategies that would allow her to be successful. She provided one example by saying,

Like I use colored pens and then I use highlighters of different colors. And my friends were like, I feel like I'm looking at the rainbow, you know, it's a very pretty but like dang. And I'm like, I have to distract my mind because if I just write in black and white, I can't read it. I can't read it because my mind will be like, oh, pretty color.

Finally, when asked when she feels most aware of her disability Lexi said,

Studying. Yeah. Studying when I've got to sit down and memorize. Yeah.

Studying. Oh, memorization is a problem for me. It is a huge problem. I just, I've got to move, like I'll start sitting in different...I'll get so irritated with myself because I can't memorize. I'll start writing it down five to ten times and I'll be so irritated because an hour later I don't remember it. And studying makes me remember I have ADHD so badly because I'll wait, I'll wait on it and I'm like, I shouldn't be waiting on it. I should be doing it now. But I'm like, I know the struggles are coming. But I try and that's why I use my notes.

Lexi was very open about her struggle with studying through both her high school and college experience, however, she also provided insight into how she's built her own strategies which brought on many examples of academic success despite her disability.

Student determination. Another contributing factor to both participants' persistence is the student's determination. This theme appeared through numerous examples within both participant interviews. First, while discussing what happens when he feels his disability and has trouble communicating his thoughts, Lucas explained his strategy for handling those difficult moments. He shared,

But that doesn't really happen all that often and when I do I generally turn it in to a comedic moment so that everyone laughs. I usually am like, "Yep. I'm fully aware that done had an explosion in my mouth and that's okay."

He turns some of his embarrassing moments into more comedic moments which helps him get through the experiences. Lucas' positive attitude was also apparent when he described his first few weeks of college. He shared,

I was excited, but just overall very overwhelming. I had a rough couple nights, not going to lie about that, but hey, that's alright. I was able to truck through it and eventually by the time I got here to the actual university itself, I was for the most part mentally ready for it.

This internal motivation and will to continue through the difficult moments of his transition was clearly an influence throughout his overall transition. Lexi also provided many examples of her own determination through her transition. While describing why she wanted to attend college in the first place she shared,

I knew I wanted to go to college because my cousin who doesn't have ADHD. Because I felt a lot of discrimination with me having ADHD, a lot of people believed I wouldn't be able to survive in college even though I was in the top 20 students in my grade class. I was still a fairly smart kid. I could do it. So my cousin convinced me to check out four-year universities.

Lexi really felt strongly that she could achieve success in college, despite other's concerns or discrimination based on her disability. She came back to this point later in the interviews when she again described how other's opinions of her ability directly influenced her need to show she could handle college and she could be successful. She shared, "I want to live up to that because I've been told my whole life that because of my disability I couldn't be really successful and I couldn't go to college because of this disability." Lexi also brought this up when she described how she uses her own example of determination to motivate her niece who also struggles with school. She described, "Even though you've struggled and struggled you need to keep on pushing through and I keep on telling her to push through too." Lucas ended our interview by sharing his final thoughts on the opportunity he had to be in college and how that encouraged him to continue working toward success. He shared,

I almost said this at my RA floor meeting but I want to emphasize how important it is that everyone has made it to this point and made it to college. That's such an accomplishment and I want to point it out when I can.

With both participants, this determination and confidence within themselves became a recurring theme within their stories about their transition and where, when needed, they created their own support.

Sense of belonging through student leadership. Sense of belonging and student leadership were also described by both Lucas and Lexi when they shared their experience transitioning to Midwest University. Both participants described how they felt at home and fell in love with Midwest University almost immediately. Lucas shared, “I am glad that I came here because even though the initial reason was just because of the autism support program, I've got to say it, I fell in love right away. It's a great place.” Lexi shared a similar sentiment, “I felt at home. I felt like this is where I wanted to go.” Lexi described an experience on her campus tour where she met the university president and how that really made an impact on her sense of belonging at Midwest University; sharing,

Because, after talking to the president, it was like everybody was so easy to talk to. Because I've learned from him, the staff and then from the students that I met, they were just like, “You say hi and everybody's just willing to talk to you.”

Lexi spoke about loving the institution right away but not immediately feeling connected at Midwest University: “It took me awhile to actually find what I love.” She went on to describe that it took her a little longer to find the specific area on campus where she really found her sense of belonging. She shared, “So it took me till my sophomore year to really find my place and that was okay. I bounced around from different clubs and everything and I just had to feel my groove.” Once Lexi found her groove, she found herself taking on more leadership opportunities. Lucas also talked about being in a few leadership positions as well.

Student Leadership. Both participants described these leadership positions as rewarding moments in their college transition. Lucas shared,

So yeah, heck I like the club so much I'm currently the vice president for the gaming club... Yeah, I'm going to be making sure that that club stays awesome after all because it was a club that I dedicated a lot of time to and so it's only appropriate to give back.

In addition to being the vice president of the Gamer's Guild on campus, Lucas is also a resident assistant, something that also spoke about with a great deal of pride. Lexi is also an involved student with leadership roles at Midwest University. During the interview, when she was asked about involvement, Lexi explained how meaningful her experience was when she represented the student organizations she was involved in at the student organization fair.

This was the first year I actually was representing a group and I'm so happy because I was loving it because I wanted to help students find their place at Midwest University. Because once you find your place you're able to do good if you wish to do well. Yeah. So it took me to my junior year to find my place and that's okay with me. I'm fine with that and I'm like, "You know what, I've got different experiences under my belt." But now I find myself in two jobs that I love and I am helping out with two groups that I love.

Lexi is also an academic leader at Midwest University. While discussing her most rewarding moment her freshman year, Lexi explained, "I'm one of the Promising Students of Business Scholars." As Lexi described this accomplishment she shared,

Once you do good academics in one aspect and you succeed in one aspect, it makes you feel good about whatever the hell is going on. It gives you that boost that you need, because you did that yourself. It made me feel very proud to know

that I have overcome. Like it made me realize I have overcome a lot in that I just need to keep on pushing through.

Both Lexi and Lucas described their sense of belonging and their love for the campus throughout their interviews. They attributed this belonging to the positive aspects of their experience and their reason for working hard and achieving success in college.

Family and friend support. Participants made it clear that support from family and friends influenced the students' transition and persistence at Midwest University. Both participants came from a home where their parents were divorced, however they cited their family's support of their transition to college throughout the interviews. When Lucas described his family support, he mainly cited his mother and two older sisters as the ones who helped him through his transition. He shared, "And it was my mother and sister that had brought me down for my freshman year and I had lived on the second floor of my residence hall for the beginning of my freshman year." He shared how he could turn to family for support when he needed it, "I would say in terms of the actual college experience itself, I absolutely have my two sisters to thank since they had gone to college already." Lexi also discussed how her family members helped support her;

My dad was really one of the main supporters of course with my sister and my cousin who were like, you know, you can. Like, don't let this disability stop you. So because they backed me up and knowing that they support me and I know I can do this and it gives me that motivation to do it, to make sure that I am reaching that goal.

While Lucas talked about his older sisters who had college experience, Lexi referred to her older cousin who had attended college and encouraged Lexi to go too. Lexi mainly

pulled her support from her dad, “But my support system was really focused on my dad. It was just me and him most of the time because I didn't get along with my biological mother at the time.” When she wrapped up her discussion on the support she received from her dad, sister, and cousin, Lexi shared, “I don't know. I put a lot of self-doubt in me. So, it's nice to have them boosting me up knowing that even though I have ADHD, they support me. They know I can do this.”

Both Lucas and Lexi had a lot to say about the friends that they met during their college transition and the support they received through their friendships. Like it was discussed in Chapter Four, Lucas made a lot of his friends on campus initially through the autism support program, and then he eventually branched out and met people through different student organizations on campus. Lucas was grateful for the friends he met through the autism support program however, he also enjoyed meeting other students who shared common interests with him like students who liked video games and students who enjoyed film and TV production. Lexi also attributed her support to her on-campus friendships:

My friends. They helped me. I truly believe they're the reason why I succeeded so well is because without them I would be so stressed. When you're stressed and you're tired and you just can't take any additional information, you don't do well. You need that good support. They really helped me keep that balance and honestly, I can't wait to see them again.

When Lexi was asked what one of the biggest lessons she learned her freshman year she explained that friendship was her biggest lesson. She shared,

Friendship? Yeah, I'd have to say friendship. There's a pivotal moment where you realize when you come to college you don't want friends just to get through the years at college. You want friends that kind of stick with you, like go through this time and the struggle and the tears. But you also just want those friends who are just like, you need a break, you know someone who can help you give a break and who is willing to help you take a break.

Lexi concluded this answer by saying,

So, it is the greatest lesson I learned because high school, you didn't really have to have relationships. College, you need them. You need to have friends to help you get by. You need to have a close group to help you get by because they understand your struggles, they understand and they're there for you. I think it's a lesson that everybody learns and knows but doesn't really appreciate that often.

While being interviewed, Lexi and Lucas described many stories and examples of the support that they received and relied on from friends and family.

Disclosure and advocacy. The final persistence factor the participants discussed in their interviews is their disclosure and advocacy strategies. Lucas described his strategy for how he chooses who to disclose to about his disability. Lucas only talked about how he shares his autism diagnosis and did not discuss his learning disability or if he shares it with faculty at any point. He shared, "I would say that I generally disclose to people that I know that I'm going to have around for a good while. That they aren't somebody who doesn't need to know per se." He continued by saying, "Everybody that I feel needs to know, knows it and everybody that doesn't know me probably wouldn't be able to tell I have it." Lucas did describe that his approach to disclosing changed slightly

with authority figures like professors or other professionals. He shared, “Unless it's an authority figure. Then I'm like, ‘Listen I have this, and here's the paper that you need for that. Cool? Cool.’” When Lexi was asked about her strategies for disclosing her disability she shared a similar sentiment. She explained,

If someone asked me if I have this, I say yeah, but I'm not shouting it out to the world. I do have ADHD, but I want people to look at my successes. You want to say, I have ADHD and this is how she succeeded. Like, no, I succeeded even though I do have this, even though I do have this disability, I still succeeded a fair amount.

When asked about how they advocate for their own disability, the participants shared that they will if they see a reason to, but don't go out of their way to be an advocate. Lucas shared,

So I do advocate for myself but I also kind of don't see a reason to at the same time because it's not the end of the world if I don't get it. Because I 'm used to being treated like a proper student and that's okay.

Lexi's response was,

I try to learn from my disability and make life better for the younger generation: mostly my family. I'll tell my niece you don't have to learn by sitting and not moving. Like you can move, let's move, let's do something. I try to use my disability to try to better lives around me because that's how I do it. I don't really like advocate saying I have ADHD.

When asked for further clarification of what she meant Lexi explained, “I understand why we need those people who do publicly advocate, but I'm just saying I'm not one of

those. I'm more of like, I'll take care of my family.” Both participants identified they would disclose or advocate for their disability if they felt it was a necessary situation to do so.

College Services and Resources

When the participants discussed their transitions, they also identified several college services and resources that they utilized. The college services and resources described were: campus resources, faculty and staff, and accommodations and the Office of Disability Services. Each of these themes will be explored in detail to provide the unique perspective of the participants about college services and resources that affected their transition to Midwest University.

Campus resources. Lucas and Lexi both discussed many campus resources that assisted with their college transition. Lucas discussed the support provided by the campus’ autism support program:

Honestly, it was primarily the autism support program because it was like, “okay so here's what you need, here's where you can go if you need to do this or that.” Everybody in the autism support program was very good about making sure that if I needed something they would address it and help me out with that. If there was something I wasn't doing, they would whack me over the head with it.

He also shared,

I'm pretty satisfied with everything. I mean, the autism support program was absolutely at least like 80% of the resources I had used. Especially my freshman mentor. Other than that, I would turn to my RA. Overall, I would say that if I ever had a problem it was answered relatively quickly

Lucas explained how the program would provide additional support materials for his classes, “The autism support program is always nice enough to try and provide any materials or like sum up my materials. Generally, they are also a good resource for preparing me for all that stuff.” Interestingly, Lexi also brought up the autism support program in her interview as well though it was for a completely different reason. Lexi shared, “I feel like they could do so much more with the learning disabilities because unfortunately when you're on the autism spectrum you get regular checkups and regular diagnoses.” She continued to explain that though the campus has all of these more formalized supports for students on the autism spectrum, sometimes the students with learning disabilities don't have access to the supports that they may need.

Another resource that both students mentioned was Financial Aid. First, Lexi discussed this aspect when she described how she fell in love with Midwest University and her dad immediately went to the financial aid office to make sure it would be possible for Lexi to attend. She shared, “My dad actually started planning out our finances to allow us to go here.” Lucas also listed financial aid as one of his greatest stressors and challenges of his freshman year. First he shared, “I was also stressing out about the giant financial aid stuff regarding college because like at the time, it was very overwhelming.” Later in the interview, Lucas talked about financial aid as a stressor again, “One challenge was when I went through a time with my meal plan and financial aid and money.” Though finances are stressful for most students, these stresses can be highlighted by additional program costs like the autism support program. Also growing up with a disability, Lucas' parent's handled everything that had to do with finances and

money management, so Lucas never experienced the importance of smart financial literacy practices.

Lucas mentioned a few other campus resources he utilized his freshman year, “It wasn't like a hard transition for me, it was just some of the weird stuff like maybe the shuttle bus since I don't have a car. I would struggle to get on the shuttle at certain times.” Lucas also listed the website and the residence hall front desk as services he used. He explained, “I would say probably the website overall...Other than that I was often a visitor of the front desk to ask some questions.” He was well informed through his autism program so he knew who to seek out.

Faculty and staff. Faculty and staff were another campus resource described in both participants' transition stories. Lexi described her faculty and staff relationships by explaining how their approachability supported and encouraged her. She shared, “But when you see the basis of the people like the teachers or like the staff, like they get to the relaxed state, you know, like because [this area]; We're pretty relaxed.” Lexi continued,

And from what I've noticed from the staff, from the teachers, from my favorite professor, Dr. Steven, they care so much about your schooling. They want you to succeed. They're willing to help you. They don't want you to fail. You can tell that they hate to see us fail, but they also kind of keep in mind that this isn't your whole life.

Lexi also described the support she receives from her internship supervisor,

I'm doing an internship and I'm learning so much about what I want to go into for my major and I'm working with a great, great teacher, and a great, a great supervisor. I love being her assistant and I want to advocate it because I'm an

undergraduate student and I am an assistant and learning about my major on campus.

Lucas also discussed different areas where he felt supported by the professors at Midwest University. The first area he discussed was the support they offer when he discloses his disability to the professors. Lucas shared, "I do disclose to my professors. Also, I think once I show them the accommodation paper that's when they're kind of like "Yep. Okay.'" Lucas continued, "They're usually very understanding about it and they generally try to provide those set accommodations as best as they are able to. Which I greatly appreciate." Finally, Lucas also described how he's been able to connect with a faculty member within his degree program through the student organizations that Lucas is involved in sharing, "My now current professor for production one is the advisor for that." This is important to Lucas because seeing his professor as an advisor to his organization gives Lucas another opportunity to make a social connection with a faculty member on campus.

Accommodations and the Office of Disability Services. Participants in this study had very different experiences with the Office of Disability Services and receiving accommodations on campus. Lucas does receive accommodations through his registration with the Office of Disability Services and his involvement with the autism support program. He described his accommodation experience by sharing,

I advocate by holding the accommodation paper to my chest and say hey, I have this, this is what I need. I do like having my accommodations more as like should I accidentally goof in terms of being a student in general. Then I have those accommodations to help me out.

When asked when he provides the accommodation papers to his professors, Lucas shared, “Yeah, I generally do that in the first two weeks.”

Lexi’s accommodation experience with the Office of Disability Services is very different,

So I've been diagnosed with it for a very long time and even now with Midwest University, I'm not in their system because they want an updated version of it and I don't have the money to pay for that. I can't, I can't do that. Basically, I wish I could get the help to make myself better even though I'm doing fairly well on my own. Like I do fairly well, but I'm like, it just makes me a reminder like, what if I wasn't doing fairly well? My Dad couldn't afford to get an updated version of my diagnosis.

Lexi described where she felt there could be more support provided by the Office of Disability Services to students with learning disabilities,

I don't have any support like financially to do it and I feel like that's kind of that thing where they're kind of failing at because a lot of students have learning disabilities, but they can't get an updated report of it. When you think about ADHD, you don't get regular checkups and make sure that you still have it because it's genetic and even though there's like a chance where it can be dimmed down to a lower amount, which still means we still have it. We've just learned to manage it and I feel like their program could be like, “Oh you have it, you do have it, but you're not one of those students who need day-to-day help or like week-by-week help. Maybe like every two weeks help and everything.” I feel like we should be able to have something where they can still help them.

Lexi concluded this discussion by emphasizing her wish for more support for students with similar challenges. She shared,

I kind of look at it like if someone's diagnosed with ADHD and even if they have only one problem with it, we should still help them because that one problem can turn into a bigger issue and make them have problems with all sorts of different things.

In regards to support from accommodations and the Office of Disability Services the participants described very different perspectives and experiences.

Summary

Chapter Five provided an analysis and reflection of the participants' discussions with the researcher from the interview process. Both participant's stories can be reviewed through the lens of the two research questions. In chapter six a discussion of the participants' narratives and the presented analysis will take place followed by the implications of this research and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to determine which factors influence persistence for students with learning disabilities as they transitioned from high school to college. This chapter will review the research and feature the participants' perspectives on their transitions into higher education. Implications for student affairs professionals, disability services coordinators, students with learning disabilities, parents and families, and K-12 educators will be provided within this chapter. The research questions guiding this study are (a) How do students with learning disabilities at a four-year college persist? (b) What college services and resources contribute to the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities? The discussion of the results of this research is provided below along with recommendations for future research and conclusions.

Discussion

This section will describe the different themes from Chapter Five and will also provide insight into why those themes may have emerged within the research. This section is not about specific learning disabilities, rather it's about the students' persistence and their use of the resources.

Persistence Factors. This study was designed to look at how students with learning disabilities persist in college. After conducting the interviews, many factors appeared throughout the transcripts indicating how they influenced the students' persistence. The common factors reported were academic workload and studying, student perseverance, sense of belonging and student leadership, family and friend support, and disclosure and advocacy.

Academic workload and studying. During the interviews both participants discussed the personal differences they felt between the academic rigor at the high school level compared to the college level. Lexi was more up front about her feelings toward her high school academic preparation and that there wasn't enough of it, perhaps due in part to losing disability documentation and her changing schools. Lucas seemed to receive more structured support than Lexi experienced while he was in college because of his autism diagnosis and ability to maintain an IEP. Within these discussions, the participants described their own study strategies and how they figured out what worked for them. Lexi discussed needing to find the balance between constantly working on homework and learning when it was okay to take a break. Lucas, on the other hand, had to learn not to procrastinate and to do his work when it was assigned. It was especially powerful in the interview with Lexi when she explained she most felt her disability when she was studying. Both participants seemed to know that their disability did have an effect on their studying and academics in college, but both were also determined to rise to the challenge and find the strategies that worked best for them. Both Lucas and Lexi relied on the strategies and things they had learned during their time through the K-12 system. However, the students didn't learn these strategies overnight. They were able to find out what worked for them by ruling out what didn't help them in their search for academic success. Denhart's (2008) research described how students with learning disabilities were challenged and stressed the most by their reading and writing assignments. Hadley (2017) also identified that students who learned to manage their assignments through the use of time-management skills are more likely to be successful. This is what Lexi had to ultimately learn.

Lucas received support throughout his K-12 experience and he was able to build a bit on that support when he attended Midwest University. Additionally, Lucas entered the college in a program designed to support students with autism. The support and preparation that Lucas received did seem to prepare him for the greater academic workload in college. This IEP preparation seemed like the crucial preparation for Lucas to better understand the change in his academic workload. In contrast, Lexi seemed more surprised and really had to try out a couple of different learning strategies before she found the ways to best learn at Midwest University. Though she didn't receive this preparation, Lexi would have most likely also benefitted from an IEP at the end of her high school time to better understand and prepare for the different academic environment that she would encounter in college. She also relied on what she learned in a college course from a professor who wanted to help everyone.

Student determination. Both Lucas and Lexi did face more challenges than most of their peers and shared examples of their perseverance in college throughout their interviews. Lucas described using humor as a way to navigate potentially embarrassing or difficult moments. He also talked about how he got through stressful times in his transition to college like the first few weeks of college. Lexi also showed great examples of how she managed to get through the first few months of college within the interview, despite being told she shouldn't attend a four-year college; Lexi knew she wanted to attend the university and that she could also handle and even be successful in college.

They both spoke about how they were internally motivated to be successful in college. First, it provided the motivation both students needed to apply to Midwest University and pursue a college degree. The participants' awareness of their own abilities

also helped them navigate the difficult situations they encountered while going through the transition from high school to college. Using their own determination to get through the tougher situations did seem to help build their self-confidence which was needed to continue with their college studies.

Both students knew that they learned differently than others and this influenced their own self-perception. They also had the perception that other students were learning much easier than they did. Though this may or may not have been the case, both students felt they had something to prove which furthered their motivation to work harder. Perhaps the most important person they were proving this too was themselves. They both shared that they did feel successful in college.

Students with disabilities are coming to college with the strategies they have developed through their K-12 experiences and they have the awareness that they learn differently from their peers and that it's okay to learn differently. In the K-12 system they had a great deal of support from parents, teachers, counselors, administrators and even peers; there is an opportunity for them to have these same supports in college, but the students have to become better advocates for themselves to set these networks up. Lucas is a great example of how being part of a group or network of resources to support his disability can have a positive impact. Lexi came in without documentation or any way to get additional resources or support. Because of this, Lexi had to navigate this on her own. Disability services offices on the college campus can also help the student refine and develop strategies on how to adjust their learning styles to meet the academic and learning needs in college. Once students with a disability understands their own learning styles, they are more empowered and motivated to be successful and persist even through

difficult situations. These students with this resilience were more likely to graduate based on this grit and self-confidence (Madaus et al., 2014). Showers and Kinsman (2017) identified students' individual attributes significantly influenced a student's ability to persist.

Based on the results of this research, it's important to understand students' individual motivations and empower students with learning disabilities as they transition to college. They must feel confident in their skills, strategies, and overall ability to succeed. This begins in the social structures of students with learning disabilities and within the K-12 education system. Practitioners who work in postsecondary education can also contribute to success of students with learning disabilities by encouraging their resilience and confidence in their own abilities and being available to the students whether they have the proper documentation or not.

Sense of belonging and student leadership. Within the interviews, both students indicated that they fell in love with the university and campus very early on in their transition. Lexi discussed that she knew she wanted to go to Midwest University the first time she walked on campus and Lucas said once he got settled he fell in love with the campus pretty quickly. This initial feeling contributed to their sense of belonging on campus, which, in turn, helped contribute to their overall persistence. Because they felt the campus was a place where they belonged, they both initiated processes to find their own groups on campus and grew into student leaders through those groups. The students wanted and sought out what most would categorize as a "typical" college experience and did so by joining groups and becoming leaders in areas they felt comfortable. Both students searched for a campus where they felt they could fit in and then took advantage

of the campus environment and searched for groups on campus that they would fit in with as well. Through both interviews it was clear the students were proud of their achievements not only academically, but also socially. Both reflected on their leadership positions with pride and felt they were great achievements through their college transitions.

Lucas was influenced through the autism support program to go to events and explore which organizations worked for him. This extra push from the support program really influenced his experience. Lexi did not have this support and it took her much longer to find her fit within on-campus student organizations. This was mainly because she initially spent so much time on her studies. Had she had support like Lucas did or was prepared to identify her fit earlier, she may have engaged earlier. These results align with Mamiseishvili and Koch's (2011) findings that showed a student who participated in at least one or two extra social activities showed more potential to persist compared to those who did not get involved.

Lucas and Lexi also both got lucky with ending up at a school where they experienced sense of belonging and found their place. As previously discussed, students who felt their campus environment was hostile or not accommodating toward students with disabilities was directly connected to the development of their sense of belonging (Evans et al., 2017). Though Lexi felt more could be done to accommodate students with learning disabilities, overall both participants felt the campus was an accommodating environment toward students with disabilities. More could be done at the high school level to encourage students to not only search for schools that will fit their academic interests, but also to their social and extra-curricular interests. This encouragement within

the K-12 system would be even more beneficial for students with learning disabilities as this research has shown that finding student organizations and developing that sense of belonging did influence the persistence of both Lexi and Lucas. This is especially important for students with disabilities as feelings of rejection by a campus or community is a main influencer of persistence and puts students with disabilities at risk for non-completion (O'Keefe, 2013).

Family and friend support. The support provided by the participants' friends and family contributed to their persistence. The students relied on their support from their families and friends to help influence their own success once they started at Midwest University. Both participants did not come from the most stable home situations with each participant dealing with their parents going through various stages of divorce. However, despite this instability, both relied on their family members especially during the initial aspects of their transition like the college search and the first few weeks of their time at Midwest University. Both students also emphasized how important it was when they found their niche on campus and were then able to build a strong support group of friends on campus. Both explained within their interviews how their friends encouraged them to aim for and achieve academic success. Because the students received such support from friends and family, they were able to achieve academic and overall success through their transition and understood how that contributed to their own persistence at Midwest University.

These results matched the discussion within the literature review of this research which explored the relationship between student social integration and a student with a learning disability's likelihood to persist. DaDeppo's (2009) study determined that for

students with learning disabilities, social integration was more influential to a student's ability to persist than academic integration. Research by Couzens and colleagues (2015) also aligned with Lexi's emphasis on the importance of the support received from her friendships. According to Couzens, students with learning disabilities used their friends to support them through academic challenges or help with their organizational habits and study skills.

Based on these results, the families and friends of students with disabilities should be prepared to support their students when they transition to college in a little different or extended manner. Though this is something that is addressed by many schools at the parents and family side of new student orientation, more needs to be done at the high school level to prepare families of students about the new role they may take on in their student's lives. Additionally, students must be encouraged when they transition into college to seek out those friendships that will help support them academically and encourage them to get them involved. Because students with learning disabilities tend to spend more time focusing on their academics, like Lexi, they may choose not to devote as much time to their social support system. This conclusion supported the research within chapter two as Dryer and colleagues (2016) also found students with disabilities spent more time on academics and forgot to make room for social activities. Due to this scenario, providing social support group meetings for students with disabilities may be a great way for students to "make time" within their academic schedule to meet with and socialize with other students with disabilities.

Disclosure and advocacy. Both of the participants interviewed shared a similar philosophy toward when they disclose or advocate their disability. Through the

interviews, both shared that they only disclose their disability in situations where they feel it's necessary. Based on their interviews however, it seemed like Lucas received more motivation and encouragement to both disclose and advocate for his needs because of his participation within the autism support program. Because Lexi was unable to register with the Office of Disability Services, she did not necessarily have the accommodations request and the support of that office to back her up if she were to try and disclose to professors or attempt to advocate for support.

Frameworks explained. Looking at these results through the lens of the different disability theories, it becomes clear why both of the participants felt that they could advocate and disclose their disability if needed, but also weren't in a rush to advocate to everyone about their learning disability and what it meant to them. Using Gibson's (2006) disability model for reference, Lucas and Lexi would both be placed within the final stage of the model, acceptance. According to Gibson, this is when students feel an understanding toward their disability and use strategies for different ways to advocate and disclose their disability throughout their day-to-day lives. Both Lucas and Lexi felt comfortable discussing their disability with others and seemed to feel safe requesting what they need or, in Lexi's case, describing what would be helpful if she were given the opportunity to be registered.

Similarly, based on their disclosing strategies, both participants would most likely end up in either the fourth stage of Johnstone's (2004) disability identity model, empowering identities or the fifth stage, complex identities. In the empowering identities stage, students make the shift toward viewing their disability positively and are okay with requesting accommodations and sharing their disabilities with others. Alternately, in the

complex identities stage, students look at their disability as a portion of their identity but understand that there are other aspects to their identity as well.

Critical Disability Theory was also discussed in the literature review of this study and can be connected to the participants' experiences as well (Evans et al., 2017). This theory focuses on the students' disability and their environment and how that combination affects their identity. Lucas' interview and experiences most connects to this theory because he was placed in an autism support group on campus that provides an on-campus environment that is structured to encourage students to develop their disability identities through the use of guided support groups, academic and social integration, and daily living skills.

Based on these results, both students were fairly developed within the knowledge and acceptance of their learning disability within their identity. These results are important because it shows how beneficial it is for students with disabilities to receive encouragement and support from those around them to continue to grow within their own disability identity development. This is a long process but it can be influenced along the way by a number of sources including high school practitioners, peers, family members, student affairs professionals, and college faculty and staff among many others.

College Services and Resources. The second guiding question in this research was what college services and resources contribute to the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities? Campus resources, faculty and staff, and accommodations and the Office of Disability Services were all college services and resources that participants discussed in relation to their transition from high school into college.

Campus resources. During the interviews the participants discussed the different campus resources and college services that they had used particularly during their transition. They discussed the autism support program at Midwest University, Financial Aid, and the accommodations process with the Office of Disability Services. Lucas also explained additional college services he used during his transition like the front desk staff of his residence hall, the campus shuttle system, and the campus website. Though the participants were able to list a few they used, they really did not mention other academic campus resources available at their institution like the student support center, tutoring services, health and counseling services, the writing center, or other general services available. Interestingly, when the students were asked how they best achieved academic success they both referred to personal strategies or their own skill and mindset instead of discussing the college services and resources that are specifically for helping students achieve academic success.

These results did reflect the research discussed in the literature review. Stack-Cutler and colleagues (2015) also found that though some of their participants attributed institutional outlets to their success, they found most students mentioned those supports less and instead discussed informal or peer supports. One informal support for the students was themselves and their own self-motivation. This seemed to be the case with both participants as Lexi really discussed her own self-reliance as her best tool. Though Lucas did attribute a lot of his success to the autism support program, when it came down to it, he really focused in on his individual strategies and confidence as well.

It was also important that both participants mentioned their experiences with financial aid. Within the literature review and overall research about persistence for

college students, financial aid is usually discussed as an influential factor to a student's ability to persist. As discussed in the research of Stewart and colleagues (2015), the federal regulations requiring students keep a certain GPA (2.0) and completion rate (67%) to remain eligible for aid can negatively affect their persistence. This is especially important for students with learning disabilities because they need to spend even more time than other students to navigate their academic workload and they may face more of a challenge to keep their GPA at the required academic level. Another piece of this that can be a problem with this policy is that it fails to take into account the transition period for students. Students may need to have a less successful first semester in their transition to help them realize they need to adjust their study strategies or request the support they need. In this semester they could potentially do some damage to their GPA which is more challenging to recover after a student's experienced a rough semester. Students may also need to take a reduced course load or drop a class which can affect their financial aid as well. Madaus and colleagues (2014) discussed that students with disabilities who seek out additional support may experience additional fees due to their extra services used. This was the case for Lucas as the autism support program cost him an additional \$3,000.00 for one academic year in order to receive all the support systems that program had in place.

These results provide insight for those who work with students with disabilities or for those who work within the areas that provide these different college services to students. More can always be done to make students aware of their access to these services. However, the efforts can't end there. Once students know about the resources available they need to be encouraged to really utilize these resources. Partnerships

between these services and the faculty could help bridge the gap for students and provide a risk-free introduction to these offices if they are using them initially because it's a requirement through their classes. Additionally, with many students utilizing some form of financial aid and knowing that cost can become a barrier to student persistence, more can be done to build partnerships between financial aid offices and offices that support students with learning disabilities. For example, if it's determined students will need more than basic accommodations and will require a weekly tutor that will be at the expense of the student, it may help a student persist if the office of disability services connects with the financial aid office to provide the student options to alleviate the costs.

Faculty and staff. The results of this research show that the participants experienced a lot of support through the faculty and staff at Midwest University. Aside from her friends and family, Lexi mainly discussed the support she received from her professors and supervisors and how that motivated her to achieve the level of success she wanted. Lucas also discussed his relationships with faculty and staff and how they were usually receptive to his request for accommodations when he disclosed to them about his learning disability.

Their experiences extend the discussion within the literature review regarding the importance of positive faculty and staff relationships with students with learning disabilities. Mamiseishvili and Koch (2011) discussed that through their study they found 85.3% of students were willing to seek out their professor outside of class to discuss support and strategies to successfully complete their course with a learning disability. Both Lexi and Lucas had encouraging and positive experiences with their professors which really helped them feel confident in their abilities to do well in their courses.

Hong's (2015) research found some students felt they were treated differently by professors once they disclosed and felt misunderstood. Though this is still very likely to happen in some circumstances, the participants in this study did not discuss any instances where they felt they were approached differently by their professors because of their disability. Yessel and colleagues (2016) repeated a 1999 study that examined faculty willingness to provide accommodations and overall relationships with students with learning disabilities. This research found a change and increase in approachable and positive relationships between the faculty and students. While reflecting on their own experiences, Lucas and Lexi described their interactions with faculty as being very positive.

This is an important result to highlight because the overall research did show an increase in faculty awareness about building strong and accommodating relationships with students with disabilities. Faculty-student relationships are so important for students with learning disabilities because the faculty are one of the main resources students can access if they are struggling with their classes. If students with learning disabilities feel their professors are a safe person to approach with their diagnosis and seek out support with the coursework, this could ultimately boost their overall confidence which, in turn, will increase their motivation to persist.

Accommodations and the Office of Disability Services. The results of this research presented within Chapter Five examined the differences between the participants' experiences with accommodations and the Office of Disability Services. Because Lucas participated within the autism support program, he received accommodations through the structure and support of his received accommodations and

he did not hesitate or experience any real stress to go through the Office of Disability Services to receive the supports necessary to be successful in college. In a completely different situation, Lexi really wished that she could have been registered with the Office of Disability services on campus however she felt she could not attain and provide the correct paperwork required for documented support from the university.

Specifically, regarding accommodations, the literature review found many students were hesitant and reluctant to request accommodations (Denhart, 2008). Egan and Giuliano (2009) also found that students who did request accommodations were afraid of being misunderstood or treated differently than their peers by their professors. Research connected the stigma students with learning disabilities faced and their fear of requesting accommodations. Weis and colleagues (2014) researched the decision-making process for disability services coordinators and found that the student's current diagnosis and their disability history were the most used factors when they determined which accommodations to assign to the students.

These results paired with the information provided within the literature review highlight a disconnect within a university and how it supports students with all disabilities. Though there are regulations as to what is needed to prove a documented disability that must be upheld, there are still opportunities to support students that could be implemented, and the students could utilize these supports regardless of their status as being registered with the Office of Disability Services or not. For example, if a student is unable to provide documentation to an Office of Disability Services, that office can provide a connection to other campus resources like the tutoring center or writing center that could still support the student even without a registered diagnosis. An Office of

Disability Services could also provide outreach to other areas of campus and explain their role in supporting students. They would also provide information about where students looking for more informal resources than the support from the Office of Disabilities Services can go.

Other campus partners can assist with eliminating the stigma students face with using the Office of Disability Services. Recruitment efforts of universities should include detailed information about the Office of Disability Services and what it provides. Because there unfortunately is a stigma associated with disabilities in today's society, talking about the support for students with disabilities needs to be a highlighted piece of campus tours, presentations, and orientations. If the discussion about supports for students with disabilities is not an intentional conversation from the beginning, why would a student who already is worried about their reputation and the stigma associated with their disability seek out help on their own? It's crucial that students needing support for their disability is normalized within not only the circle of those who work closely with the Office of Disability Services, but anyone who works with students as they transition from high school to college.

Implications

Based on the analysis of results in chapter five and the discussion of those results in the beginning of this chapter, it's clear that there are areas for improved support of students with learning disabilities within higher education and the education system in general. Student affairs professionals, practitioners within the Office of Disability Services, students with learning disabilities, parents and families of students with

learning disabilities, and K-12 practitioners can all implement strategies to help support the transition and persistence of students with learning disabilities in college.

Student affairs professionals. Student affairs professionals and higher education professionals can contribute to the persistence of students with learning disabilities at the college level in many ways. Some strategies highlighted by this research include building and strengthening campus partnerships with the intention to better support students with learning disabilities and helping to normalize the stigma surrounding students with disabilities. Student affairs professionals who work within academic support services like student success centers, tutoring centers, or similar departments could work to partner with their campus' Office of Disability Services to better combine their resources and services.

Student affairs professionals in all departments can actively work to normalize the stigma associated with disability in society. Admissions counselors, tour guides, orientation leaders, and many other roles on campus can introduce all students to the support services provided by the Office of Disability Services and make sure students are fully aware of the support offered. This may make the office more approachable for students with learning disabilities who are reluctant to ask about the service offered as that would ultimately disclose their disability. This also would make it easier for a student to feel welcome and free to develop as a leader in a judgement-free zone.

Office of disability services. This research also provides implications specifically for current practitioners within the Office of Disability Services. Offices that support students with disabilities can implement free support groups for students with learning disabilities. Providing these support group meetings could benefit students with learning

disabilities in a couple ways. The students would be able to discuss their personal studying strategies with each other and interact with other students who may also feel that they learn differently than most of their peers. These types of groups will also provide a built-in social time for students who may otherwise fill their schedule with hours of academic work and studying. This will encourage students to take a break and build a social support network that the research has shown is almost more useful to students than other types of academic support (Dadeppo, 2009).

It is also important to provide outreach and educational opportunities for students who are unable to be registered with the Office of Disability Services. This education and outreach could be provided through study skills workshops, support groups and training on how to navigate college successfully with or without a registered learning disability. Another implication for professionals is the importance of training faculty and staff on different disabilities and what they should do with accommodation letters when they receive them or how to talk with their students about their disability. Students are very aware when they make a professional feel awkward or unsure and if a faculty or staff member is trained on what to do when a student discloses, that alleviates the potential for an awkward encounter for both the student and the faculty member.

Students with learning disabilities. Based on this research, students with learning disabilities transitioning into college can also take away a few key ideas. Students need to understand the importance of building connections with their professors, making the professors a support that the student can go to if they need assistance. Students should also feel encouraged to avoid hesitation and seek out the support from the office of disability services if they have access to the necessary documentation

required to have their disability registered on campus. Finally, students should feel empowered to surround themselves with others who support them. The literature review and results of this research highlighted the importance of student's social support network in relation to their persistence and initial transition and students should feel supported while they navigate the challenging transition.

Parents and families. Parents and families can assist their students with learning disabilities by taking the time to research and understand the difference between support services for students with learning disabilities in high school and the support services in college. Parents need to do this to understand that it is mainly up to the student and their own self-advocacy to receive the supports that they need to ensure a smooth transition and eventual persistence within post-secondary education. Along with this idea, parents need to understand that they can no longer be the main point of advocacy for a student and their disability if this is the role the parent played within the student's K-12 education. Ultimately the student needs to feel supported and confident to advocate for themselves; this support and confidence is something the parents and families of students with learning disabilities can provide.

K-12 Practitioners. Though this research mainly discussed the outcomes of the students' transitions into college and their college experiences, there are still implications of this research for K-12 practitioners. Special education teachers and those on the IEP team can assist within the early stages of a student's transition into college; their college search. Throughout the literature review and the analysis and discussion of this study's results sense of belonging was discovered to be a major influence on the persistence of a student with learning disabilities. This makes it crucial for a student's success that they

know to look for and ultimately attend a school that will be their best fit. A school that supports students with learning disabilities needs both academically *and* socially is important for the student's long-term success. Based on this conclusion, it's never too early for students with disabilities to learn the importance of approaching the college search with the goal to find an institution that offers a balanced social and academic fit for the student.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research focusing on college students with learning disabilities would not only add to the research already conducted but will also provide students within this specific population a greater voice for their own perspectives and experiences. It would also be important to include more perspectives of others involved within this process; like qualitative research exploring the experiences of faculty members or disability services office practitioners. An interesting area to focus on with faculty and staff perspectives would be their experiences with trainings and education they've received on how to support the persistence of students with learning disabilities. While conducting the literature review, there was a lack of information about graduate students with learning disabilities and their experiences with support in post-bachelor's degree programs. Because more students with disabilities are entering college, it would be interesting to study what then happens when more students with learning disabilities further their education past a bachelor's degree.

Conclusion

The current study utilized the narrative approach to understand the influences on persistence of college students with learning disabilities. This research found that

students do utilize college services and supports to assist through their transitions into college. The main college support the participants of this research used was the faculty and staff on the college campus. However, the main overall source for the participants' support was through their social supports and their own confidence and resiliency. The participants in this research relied on the support of their family and friends while they approached and navigated their college transition. The students' sense of belonging built through their social connections on campus provided them the motivation to succeed and persist within the institution.

This study found that students with learning disabilities could benefit from additional support from campus disability support offices, student affairs professionals, K-12 educators, and parents and families of the students. Through the use of partnerships between departments on college campuses, implementation of support groups, and more high school preparation for the college search, students with learning disabilities can be provided the tools to better navigate the college transition and increase their opportunity for success and persistence at a four-year university.

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Appendix A

Candidate Email

Hello _____,

My name is Abby Frye and I am currently a student in the College Student Affairs Master's program. This email is about a study I am conducting as a part of my Master's Thesis project under the direction of Dr. Diane Timm. This study will explore which persistence factors for college students with learning disabilities influence their transition into college. The Office of Disability Services has identified you as meeting the qualifications to be a participant in this study. The qualifications for this study are that you have a learning disability and have attended college for at least one year. I am interested in learning about your transition into college. Interviews for this study will last about an hour in a convenient location for you. All discussions with me will be kept confidential; and will only be used for the purposes of this study. With this study, I hope to add to the research conversation by providing a consideration of the perspectives of students with learning disabilities attending a four-year mid-sized rural university.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me through email at alfrye2@eiu.edu.

I look forward to hearing your story! Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Abby Frye

College Student Affairs Master's Candidate

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Primary, secondary and tertiary questions.

- Tell me about yourself.
- What is your major and grade level.
- Tell me about your high school experience.
 - What were you involved in during high school?
 - Tell me about your high school support system and your high school experience.
 - What was your relationship like with your teachers?
 - What was your relationship like with your parents?
 - Tell me about your high school preparation for college.
 - What sort of support did you receive?
 - Did you have an IEP in high school, can you tell me more about that experience?
 - As part of your IEP did you talk college preparation?
- Tell me about your college search. How did you choose EIU in your college search?
 - Who helped you in your search?
 - What role did the support you would receive (from disability services) play in your decision?
- Tell me about your first couple of weeks here in college.
 - Tell me about your experiences meeting people here at eastern.

- How would you describe your friend groups?
- How have your peer and social supports influenced your transition into college?
- Tell me about your experiences with getting involved on campus.
- How do you determine who you're close with?
- Where do you get support from? What does it look like? What kind of support do you need/utilize?
 - Do the social supports you used in high school, (family and friends back home) help you here too?
 - Tell me about your experiences using other campus resources.
 - Academic Advising, Assessment and Testing, Career Services, Disability Services, Health Education Resource Center, Health Services, Housing, Minority Affairs, New Student Programs, Reading Center, Registrar, Student Standards, Writing Center
 - Describe strategies you use to ensure success both academically and overall.
- How satisfied are you with the campus supports and services available to students on campus? Explain why or why not.
- Now I would like to talk a little bit about your learning disability specifically and your experiences through school. Can you begin by telling me about when you were first diagnosed?
 - What was that process like?
 - When did you begin to understand what your diagnosis/disability meant?

- Tell me about some of the support you received growing up in school was like. How has that differed/continued in college?
- Do you disclose your learning disability to other students or peers on campus? If you do, how do you determine who you disclose to?
- Are you registered with the Office of Disability Services here at Eastern? If so, tell me about your experiences with the office.
- How have you advocated for yourself and your disability while in college?
- When do you disclose to professors and other staff about your learning disability?
- How do you cope with the heavy academic workload that comes along with college?
- When do you feel most aware of your learning disability?
- Tell me about your greatest challenge of the transition process from high school to college.
- When faced with a challenging situation, how do you successfully navigate through the challenges?
- Tell me about one of the biggest lessons you learned about yourself your Freshman year.
- Looking back at your time in college so far, tell me about your most rewarding moments.
- Is there anything else you would like to share at this time?
- What was the experience of participating in this interview like for you?

Appendix C

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Factors Influencing Persistence of Students with Learning Disabilities at Four-Year Institutions

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Abigail Frye (Supervised by Dr. Diane Timm) from the Counseling and Student Development Department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that influence the persistence of students diagnosed with learning disabilities at a four-year, mid-sized university. Another purpose is to determine if university services and resources within the institution influence persistence of college students with learning disabilities.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in a semi-structured interview that will take between 60-90 minutes. The interview will be videotaped in order to refer back to the discussion that takes place in the interview.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseeable risks in this study.

• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

You will not benefit directly from participation.

The results of this investigation could highlight university resources that influence the persistence of students with learning disabilities. This study may also show which resources or services the university could improve upon regarding their retention efforts. With this study, I hope to add to the research conversation by providing a qualitative consideration of the perspectives of students with learning disabilities attending a four-year mid-sized rural university.

• CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using a password protected computer. After completing the interviews, the data will be transcribed into word documents by the researcher. The video recordings of these interview sessions will be coded using qualitative coding. All

names of participants will be changed to protect everyone's privacy. Instead of names, participant information will be presented using pseudonyms. Data will be stored on a password protected computer. All data will be kept for at least three years at which time it will be destroyed per IRB standards.

The only other person who will see the data will be the thesis advisor, Dr. Diane Timm. The researcher and Dr. Timm will be the only individuals who have access to the recordings which will be stored on a password protected computer.

• PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

• IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Abigail Frye, Principal Investigator

alfrye2@eiu.edu

920-318-2702

• RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920

Telephone: (217) 581-8576

E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

Signature of Investigator

Date